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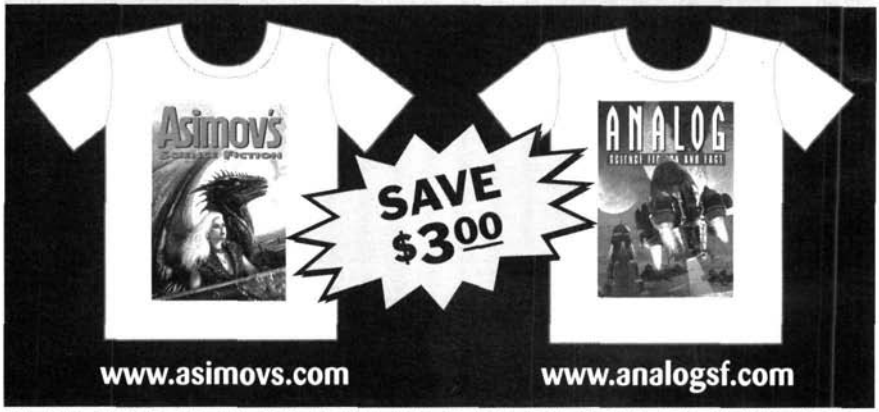

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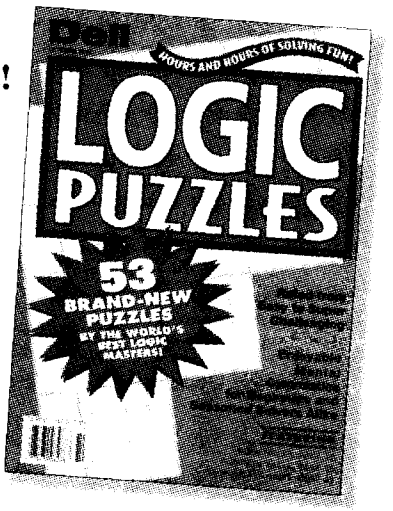

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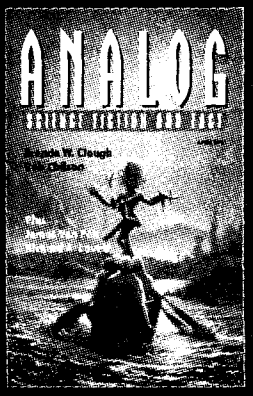

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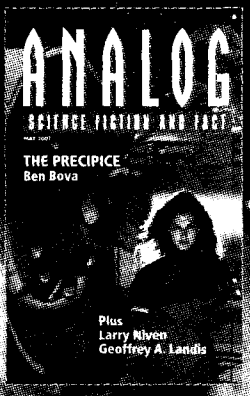

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STAG NIGHT

by Marilyn Todd

1.

Fat and replete against the trunk of an ancient oak tree, the old boar suddenly snorted awake. What was that? Hairy ears pricked forward, straining, craning—but through the dappled shade they discerned only the liquid trill of a flycatcher, the rustle of foraging beetles. Unconvinced, he lifted his snout and sniffed the sultry air. Ripe woodland raspberries. Chanterelles. The musk of a badger who'd passed through last night. Familiar scents, which should have reassured a seasoned tusker—yet the bristles down his back refused to be pacified. Obedient to a million years of instinct, the old boar lumbered to his feet.

Then he smelled it.

Dog! Dog and . . . and—He was halfway up the bank before he placed the memory.

Man.

Dog and *man,* and as he shambled towards the brow of the hill, the glade behind him filled with alien sounds. The clash of steel. Shouts. Baying. And the sickening scratch and slither as frantic

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claws sought a purchase on the slippery leaf litter . . .

Only once did the old boar glance back. The hunt was gaining. One man was way out in front now, the sunlight off the hunter's long spear blinding the boar's button eyes. This was not his first brush with the enemy. Last time, when he'd stupidly allowed himself to be cornered, he escaped only by goring two dogs to death and leaving one human male badly gashed. Even then, someone shot an arrowhead into his haunch, but he'd been lucky. The barb dropped out as he ran and the wound quickly healed. Nevertheless, it was a lesson learned the hard way, and today the stakes were higher than ever.

The first litter of the year had been raised; this was the mating season again. The old tusker had sows and his territory to protect. . . .

And so it was, crashing through the undergrowth, with the smell of sweat and metal closing fast, that the wily boar prepared his defence. . . .

The indomitable Claudia Seferius is back in a new *EQMM* adventure (her third for us). Readers may be interested to know that the series of novels in which she stars, the "I, Claudia" series, has found a publisher (Severn House) in the United States. In the United Kingdom, the seventh novel in the series, *Dream Boat*, was released in January, and *Rogue Male* is due to be released this autumn. ✝

2.

"Disappeared?" A little worm wriggled in Claudia's stomach, leaving behind an icy-cold trail. "Cypassis, grown men don't vanish in broad daylight in front of a dozen other men."

But her tone did not match the strength of her argument—goddammit, the hunt was turning into a nightmare! First her bodyguard, Junius, was stretchered home, bloodied and unconscious, having lost his footing up on the ridge. Then two more men returned, wounded and weak. *And now we hear that another member of the party's come a cropper. . . .*

"Exactly how is Soni supposed to have performed this feat of magic?" she asked. *Dear me, the lengths men go to for a few yellowed tusks and some antlers to hang on the wall!* "Taken wings, like Pegasus?"

"I know it sounds ridiculous," said her ashen-faced maid. "But apparently Soni was leading the hunt one minute and—*pfft!*—gone the next. There was talk of a boar—perhaps that distracted him, maybe he took off alone, but the point is, he hasn't come

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home—and—and—" Cypassis spread her large hands in a gesture of helplessness. "And the worrying part is, no one really cares that he's missing."

Yes, well, Claudia thought. They wouldn't be the first rich bastards not to give a toss about their slaves. "Have you questioned the bearers?" she asked. Surely they'd care that one of their number might lie at the mercy of ferocious wild beasts?

"That lot!" Cypassis sneered. "Within ten minutes of returning, they were too drunk to string two words together!"

"And Junius?" Claudia ventured. "I suppose he can't shed light on the matter?"

"Still no change in the poor boy's coma," Cypassis said sadly, and a nail drove itself into Claudia's heart.

It was her fault Junius was on the ferry landing, poised to cross the River Styx. A lump formed in her throat and refused to subside. The trouble was, the young Gaul had been so *eager* to join this morning's hunt! She paced her bedroom floor and put the stinging in her eyes down to the brilliance of the setting sun. Max, the hunt's organiser, had been against it from the start—Junius being a rank amateur and all that—but Claudia had prevailed, pleading her bodyguard's case that the last time he'd been hunting had been as a ten-year-old lad with his father, long before he'd become a slave through the wars.

Also, she wanted to give Junius a treat.

Max's hunts were famed the length and breadth of Italy—rich businessmen handed over small fortunes for the privilege of being one of the few—and if her bodyguard was to go hunting, dammit, he might as well go with the best! And now look. Waxy and pale, barely breathing, they'd scraped him up from the foot of a gully and carried him home on a stretcher.

"He'll be fine," she assured Cypassis. "I've seen these head wounds before, it's simply a question of time."

Liar. She'd never seen one in her life, had no idea whether Junius would pull through or not, but there was no point in both of them worrying themselves to a frazzle.

"And you can stop fretting about Soni. He was the star of today's show and, trust me, heroes don't pop like bubbles." Sweet Minerva's magic, to hear them talk, you'd think the boy was a god in the making, not simply another bearer Max had trained up!

"They said he led the hunt from the *start,*" Cypassis said breathlessly. "Ran like a hare, according to one. Even uphill. Even weighed down with his javelin and arrows!"

Remembering his bunched muscles and stomach harder than permafrost, it was easy to see why Cypassis had been so eager to fulfill her errand of seeking out the young slave. Claudia glanced at the girl's bosom, bouncing and generous like puppies in hay,

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and knew that no man alive had yet rejected charms given so freely and yet totally without obligation. Cypassis loved 'em and left 'em, usually with dazed grins on their faces and memories warm enough to last them a lifetime, and Soni—red-blooded hunk that he was—would be putty in those broad Thessalian hands. If Wonderboy was missing, it was certainly not because he was hiding!

With Claudia's bodyguard out of action, who better, she'd thought, than Soni for a replacement? His skill, his courage, his cunning had been praised from the rafters, and let's not forget his strength and his stamina. Thus, Cypassis had been despatched to fetch him with a view to sounding him out, but that had been over two hours ago. . . .

Across the atrium, where cedar-scented oil lamps hung from every pillar, where water cascaded down five circular tiers of a fountain, and where marble athletes wrestled, boxed, or weighed up the discus, an orchestra suddenly struck up, making her jump. Every note from the horns and the cymbals, the trumpets and drums dripped testosterone.

"Oh no! The banquet!" Cypassis clapped her hands over her mouth. "I didn't realise it was so late!" She scurried across to Claudia's jewel box and rooted out a handful of ivory pins. "There's your hair to pin up, your shoes need a buff—"

"You concentrate on finding Soni," Claudia said. Any fool can give their sandals a rub on the back of her calves, and as for her curls—well, they'd simply have to get on with it. "Unless," she grinned, "you'd rather I approached someone else?"

Deep dimples appeared in Cypassis's cheeks, and some of the colour returned. "I'll settle for Soni," she grinned back. "I hear he holds his women as tight as his liquor!"

Masculine voices boomed out in the hall, laughing, recounting, reliving as they made their way to the banquet, and Claudia clipped on earstuds shaped like bees. Gold—naturally. A present from Max. She buffed up her armband, inlaid with carnelian and pearls, another gift, and fixed a filigree silver tiara into her hair. The tiara had been the first in this generous line, along with alabaster pots containing precious Arabian perfumes, intricate onyx figurines, and rare spices all the way from the Orient.

Despite knives scraping against plate, silver platters being cleared and replaced, despite music and voices growing louder and louder, as though each had to compete with the other, Claudia made no move to join the men in the banqueting hall. Instead she leaned her elbows on the warm window sill. The setting sun had sponged the enveloping hills a warm heather pink and the mew of the peacocks strutting on the lawn cut through the rasp of the crickets and the low-pitched croon of the hoopoe. Far in the dis-

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tance, a wagon clattered over the cobbles, bringing home the last of the harvest. Down in the fertile lowlands of the Tiber, the wheat would have been threshed and winnowed a whole month before and would already be piled in granaries guarded by tomcats. But this was Aspreta, hilly and wooded, deep in the Umbrian hills.

This was the land of the huntsman.

Of one man in particular, Max—who had tamed the wild woods around his sumptuous villa to create vast landscaped gardens awash with artificial lakes, temples, and grottoes. With watercourses rippling their way down the hillsides. With fishponds and porticoes and foaming white fountains, which the dying sun had transmuted into molten copper. A skein of ducks flew overhead, and the air was rich with the smell of freshly scythed grass and the merest hint of ripe apples. It was surely impossible for anything sinister to have occurred in this Umbrian idyll. There would, Claudia felt certain, be a perfectly simple explanation for Soni's disappearance. . . .

She poured herself a glass of chilled Thracian wine and sipped slowly. Dear me, Max's lands were so vast, a girl had to positively squint to even *see* the hunting grounds from the villa. A smile twisted one side of her mouth. Oh yes. This was definitely the right decision, accepting his invitation to stay. . . .

She pictured her host, tanned and blond, lean and muscular, and knew that the sight of him in an open-shouldered hunting tunic cut high above the knee had fluttered many a female heart in its time—

Max. She rolled the name around on her tongue. Max. Ducatius Lepidus Glabrio Maximus to be precise, but known (for obvious reasons) as Max. And this fabulous estate was his. Or more accurately, was his *and his alone.* No wife—Max divorced wives like most men shuck peas—but more importantly, no heirs, either. Claudia sighed happily. That's right. No little Maxes running around, waiting to inherit the pile. Idly she wondered how quickly a girl might conceive, to redress this obvious imbalance . . .

The sun sank below the hilltops, swamping the valley in its garnet embrace, as swallows made their final parabolas over the lake. A perfect night for seduction, she reflected. A perfect night for—

A gentle tap on the door cut through her reverie. "Claudia?"

Many a fair-skinned man will suffer for a day outdoors in the sun, but the hunt had had the opposite effect on Claudia's host. It had deepened his tan, lightened his hair, and set off the white of his linen tunic to Greek-god perfection.

"Are we too raucous for you, darling?" Aegean-blue eyes ranged over the arch of her breasts, her exquisite jewels, the rich tangle of curls piled high on her head. "Is that why you haven't joined us?"

"Are you sure you want me?" she countered, as the door closed

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softly behind him. "I am, after all, the only female guest and . . . well, boys will be boys and all that."

"Janus, how could I not want you?" His eyes were smoky, his voice a rasp. "Claudia—" He opened his clenched fist to reveal a shining sapphire ring. "It's a betrothal ring."

Oh, Max. How predictable you men are!

"Oh, Max, this is so unexpected!"

For a minute he said nothing, and she watched the rise and fall of his magnificent chest. Then, as he was about to speak, the moment was broken when, emitting a cry not unlike a strangled cat, one of the peacocks on the lawn shook its tailfeathers, then spread them in a brilliant display of iridescence to a pair of peahens who continued to strut with total indifference.

"Isn't it risky, allowing such precious birds to roam free?" Claudia asked as he advanced towards her, his soft leather sandals making no sound on the dolphin mosaic. He smelled faintly—very faintly—of almonds. "Suppose your wild beasts fancied a nibble? They'd surely be the easiest of targets."

"In my business," Max whispered, his hand slipping round the curve of her waist, "a man can leave nothing to chance."

For a beat of six, Claudia watched as the drab peahens flapped in to the branch of a walnut tree to settle down for the night. Then she gently removed his hand. The peacock's fantail fell limp.

"Over that hill—" Max swept the rejected arm towards a spot far on the horizon, as though that had been its original intention "—runs a high perimeter fence with some pretty ferocious spikes on the top." He laughed. It was a melodious, gentle, masculine laugh, pitched seductively low. "The only threat to these beautiful birds is my cook. He claims their roasted flesh is delicious!"

And when searching blue eyes bored deep into her own, Claudia saw a man who was very much pleased with himself. Not smug, not self-satisfied. Just quietly confident, like a man who's achieved something special. Any other time and she'd have put that down to his counting all those lovely gold pieces that he'd fleeced off the men who were so noisily swilling his wine—had it not been for that little matter of the sapphire ring.

"That perimeter fence," he continued, "was erected not only to keep my hunting beasts in, but also to keep other animals out. Since I breed my own stock," he whispered, and she felt his breath on her cheek, "I can't risk weakening the strain by letting them loose with the native population. My bears, for instance, are particularly belligerent, and it's touches like these that give my hunts their—shall we say, *competitive* edge."

Claudia knew what he meant. Only last year, the scion of one of Rome's leading tribunes had died of wounds received whilst tangling with one of Max's famous wild wolves—an incident which,

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far from deterring others, had in fact doubled the hunter's trade. The greater the danger, apparently, the more men wanted a slice—especially rich men, who had never seen action in war. It was a pretty bizarre consequence for two decades of peace, but man's compulsion to tango with Death had made Max wealthy in the extreme. Who was Claudia Seferius to decry a system that worked?

"Somehow we seem to have drifted away," he said quietly, "from the subject of this little trinket. . . ."

The drifting was not accidental. "Max, this isn't the time." Claudia kept her gaze on the horizon. "With the banquet in full swing, you should be there for your guests."

He lifted the back of her hand to his lips and kissed it lightly. "Beauty. Intelligence. And impeccable manners, as well. Darling, you and I will forge a brilliant alliance."

Claudia said nothing, and it was only when she was alone once more in her bedroom that she realised that, somewhere along the line, Max had pressed the betrothal ring into the palm of her hand. She slipped it onto her finger and watched the light reflect off its facets.

Hot damn, this was working out well.

3.

"To Claudia!"

"Hurrah for the lady!"

"A toast to Claudia Seferius!"

One cheer after another ran round the banqueting hall, drowning the flutes in the background. All this, she thought, because I was the one who put Max on to Soni at the slave auction—what *would* they have been like, had she suggested he purchase a whole string! Goblets chinked, roasts were carved, and plates of salmon and oysters and hazel hens were passed round as slaves continuously topped up the wine. *Except.* Claudia coaxed a scallop out of its shell. Except Max had only bought the one slave, and what a magnificent specimen he was, this Soni from Gaul.

As a Greek balladeer recounted Jason's triumphant lifting of the Golden Fleece, Claudia leaned against the arm of her couch and thought back to her first meeting with Max. Was it really only three weeks ago? So much had changed in that short space of time. She popped the scallop into her mouth and reflected that, without that chance meeting at the slave auction, she would not be here tonight as . . . well, as "guest of honour," shall we say, of the man on whom Rome's wealthiest citizens descended with greater regularity than a double dose of prunes and where small fortunes changed hands for the gamble of turning wives into widows. . . .

"See this?" A portly marble merchant on the couch opposite

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lifted the hem of his tunic to show his fellow diners a livid red scar. "The puncture wound was so bloody deep, I'm left with a permanent limp, but he was a plucky bugger, I tell you. Game to the end."

"Call that a scar?" The magistrate beside him yanked at his neckline to expose a long and jagged line, barely healed. "Compared to mine, yours is a scratch."

Much to the balladeer's confusion, all eight then began dismantling expensive clothing in a bid to compare injuries, each insisting theirs was the worst while swearing at the same time that their quarry was the bravest, the toughest, possessing by far the most guile—ever. The singer's words became drowned in the melee and Max shot a slow but happy wink at Claudia. He had noticed, then, the ring she wore on her finger . . .

Perhaps not as rich as Midas, but hunts which were famed the length and breadth of Italy had enabled Max to purchase not only this fabulous villa stuffed with antiques and fine art, but lands that stretched to every horizon. No, sir. Claudia impaled a prawn on her knife. Without that chance meeting in Rome, Claudia Seferius would not be sitting here tonight with the man around whom Great Plans revolved.

Sometimes, she reflected, the gods on Olympus *do* smile down on mortals. Her mind drifted back. She'd been crossing the Forum from the east and another man had been crossing the Forum from the west. Marcus Cornelius Orbilio, to be precise, but— But dammit, the man's name was not important! What mattered was that the sweetest of all goddesses, Fortune (may her name live forever), Fortune arranged for the slave auction to be held smack in the middle of their crossing paths. And Marcus Cornelius, god bless him, knew Max. . . .

Marcus.

Marcus Cornelius.

Marcus Cornelius Orbilio.

Something skittered inside her when she pictured his face and she gulped at her wine to settle the jitters. *Pfft!* So what if he was tall and dark and—all right—not exactly bad looking? Who cared that his hair was wavy, except where it sometimes fell over his forehead, and that he wore the long tunic of a patrician? Marcus Whatsisname Thingy meant nothing to her. Nothing whatsoever. Less than zilch. In fact, the only reason her pulse raced now was owing to the lack of legality of certain scrapes she'd been in, seeing as how Supersnoop was attached to the Security Police.

In fact, that's what she'd been doing in the Forum, returning from some rather dodgy dealings, but hell, what other option was there, when merchants conspired to freeze a young widow out of the wine trade that she'd been thrust into after inheriting her late

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husband's business? Goddammit, she'd married the old goat for his money, the least others could do is allow her to spend it, but no. Supersnoop was always there, sticking his investigative snout in her business, hoping to catch her red-handed. One day he'd cotton on that she was too damned smart for him, but in the meantime Marcus God-but-I'm-handsome Orbilio had, for once in his miserable life, come up trumps.

Until then, Claudia was stuck with relying on moneylenders, con-tricks, and bluff to keep the creditors at bay, but Fortune was favouring more than the brave that day. She was favouring Claudia Seferius. It was obvious, from their frosty introductions, that the two men weren't exactly bosom buddies, and chances are the meeting would have come to nothing—had Max not then excused himself, saying he needed to purchase a slave from the block.

"Just the one?" Claudia had asked. Normally people picked up quite a number. "One is hardly worth coming to Rome for."

Suddenly the opening was there for the blond hunter to score points over his aristocratic rival. "My lovely Claudia," Max had rasped, his eyes stroking her curves. "For me, one person is *always* enough." Arched eyebrows indicated the auction block. "Which of those slaves would you recommend?"

"It depends on what qualities you're looking for," she'd purred back, with barely a glance in Marcus's direction.

"In men," Max replied huskily, "it has *got* to be staying power. Don't you agree?"

"I wouldn't settle for anything less." From the corner of her eye, she saw the flush rise on Marcus's face and, noticing Junius jabbering away in his native tongue to a fellow Gaul beside the auction block, she found it delectably easy to add, "Personally, I've always found Gauls to have extremely strong backs. . . ."

Marcus, by that time, was glaring daggers, and Max, capitalising on this sexual undercurrent, instantly bid for the Gaul, whose name, it transpired, was Soni. The same Soni who had done the hunt so proud today.

All in all, Claudia thought, things were going exceedingly well. . . .

Especially that exquisite moment when, swallowing his pride, Orbilio enquired whether he might attend Max's forthcoming hunt. Knowing these were extravaganzas to die for, Claudia watched his face turn to thunder when Max oh-so-politely informed him that, alas, he only ever took ten men on a hunt, and he was so very sorry, but the next was fully booked. . . .

As it happened, Claudia had been in the courtyard this morning when the hunt had set off. And there were eight men present, not ten. Dear me, she really must remember to mention that numbers thing to Marcus next time she saw him—

If she saw him again. The chances were, now he knew she was

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ensconced here with Max, he'd stop pestering her and stick his nose into someone else's illegal wranglings.

". . . I parried to the left, made a feint, dodged back to the right, but he was too smart for me . . ."

". . . I was impaled once, right here." More linen was bunched up to expose violated flesh. "Tossed me right onto my shoulder, he did . . ."

He! A wave of disgust washed over Claudia. They talked about boars, bears, and wolves as though they were the hunters' equals, yet how often did you see stags armed with slingshots, or running with their own pack of dogs? She looked round the banqueting hall, at watery red eyes, fists thumping on tables, where words were already slurring, and wondered how these cloistered, overweight city-types would fare in one-to-one combat. With no bearers carrying their spears or their arrows. With no dogs at their side to hound wild creatures into panic. Just them out there, with only their wits to keep them alive . . .

"Having fun, darling?"

"Absolutely."

And what would it be like living with a constant succession of drunken braggarts, day in and day out? Max coped admirably, but then the post-hunt entertainment—this orgy of showing off afterwards—was part and parcel of the package he sold. He was, she decided, a magician. An illusionist. A man who—*abracadabra!*—turns fat slobs into young bucks, and should they look in the mirror back in Rome and see who they really are, then, hey, presto! All they need do is hand over more coins and suddenly they're heroes again. The "war" wounds were not only worth the pain and aggravation, they were fundamental to the whole process.

She recalled their return this afternoon, whooping and hollering in the courtyard amid carcasses of slaughtered beasts and a welter of blood-caked spears, concerned only with the glory of their own achievements and not a single thought for the wounded. Or a lowly slave who hadn't come home . . .

"Is our hero not invited to join the celebrations?"

For perhaps a count of ten you could have heard the proverbial pin drop following Claudia's question, then everyone clamoured at once, most of them bursting into raucous, drunken, astonished laughter.

"You mean *Soni?*"

"Not in here, love!"

"Soni? Join *us?* Now that's rich!"

Claudia felt a tug on her elbow as Max gently steered her away from the couch. "That," he said, speaking through his forced smile, "was extremely embarrassing, darling. My guests comprise merchants, politicians—the cream of Roman society." He paused.

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"They do not take their dinners with slaves."

"They take their dinners with dogs."

"Cyclone and Thunderbolt are exceptions," he said, and his blue eyes were steel. "The other dogs remain in the kennels, and never, ever do *any* of the bearers join in the banquet."

"No matter how competent?"

"No matter how competent." She felt his whole body unstiffen. "I admire your liberated ideas about slaves and equality," Max said, winding one of her curls around his little finger. "But it's my job to give these men what they want, and believe me, they don't pay several thousand sesterces to dine with common slaves. Ah! The desserts."

Platters of melons and cherries, quinces in honey, almond cakes, and dates stuffed with apple passed by in mouth-watering succession.

"Come sit by me while we eat, it gives me an excuse to slip my arm round your lovely smooth shoulder."

"Shortly," Claudia promised. "There's something I must attend to first."

"Of course." Max gently released the ringlet. "Hurry back, darling," he whispered, rubbing the sapphire ring on her finger. "Your beauty is all that makes the evening tolerable. Oh, and Claudia—"

"Yes?" She turned in the doorway.

"Betrothal rings go on the left hand, my love."

4.

The room in which Junius lay was lit only by a single lamp of cheap oil, whose stuttering flame cast staccato shadows against the far wall. No mosaics covered his floor, no painted scenes brought bare plaster to life. Even the welter of bandages that swaddled his head seemed uncared for.

"You blockhead," Claudia whispered, wiping a bead of sweat from his cheek. "What did you have to go and get yourself beaned for?"

Dust motes danced in the wavering flame, and the scent of her spicy Judaean perfume blocked out the smell of caked blood. He was lucky, according to Max's physician, that no bones were broken; he'd taken one helluva tumble. But lucky was not the first word that came to Claudia's mind when she saw his shallow breathing and the waxy texture of his skin. Her hands bunched into fists. Dammit, Max knew the terrain up on the ridge like the back of his hand, he should have warned Junius that shale was dangerous. The stretcher-bearers told her what happened—how he'd lost his footing under the weight of the weaponry he was carrying—but the fact that the accident happened at all was the problem. She should not have allowed Junius to go. Max knew he

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was inexperienced, dammit, he should have insisted the boy stay behind—but since he hadn't, he should bloody well have taken better care of his charge!

She opened the shutter, allowing a small breeze to sport with the flame. From here, there was only a view of the cowshed, plus a hint of the moon through the oaks. Far away, a fox barked and she felt, rather than heard, the door open behind her.

"How is he?"

Claudia's heart flipped a somersault. It can't be. Sweet Janus, this isn't possible— She waited until her pulse settled down. "Lazy as ever," she said, not turning round. "But that's servants for you, these days. Not a thought for anyone but themselves."

The baritone chucked softly, and her heart began to spin like a top.

"I've just come from the banqueting hall," Marcus said. "And I think it's a reasonable prediction to say there'll be some jolly sore heads in the morning."

Claudia did not smile. "Orbilio, what the hell are you doing here?"

"Oh." He rubbed a hand over his chin. "Just passing."

"On your way where, exactly?"

"Home."

She took in the long patrician tunic, the high patrician boots, the firm patrician jaw. And wondered why it was that little pulse always beat at the side of his neck when they were alone. "Isn't this something of a detour for you? Say, of some one hundred miles?"

His teeth showed white in the darkness and she could smell his sandalwood unguent, even through the pong from the cowshed. Then the grin disengaged, and his voice, when he spoke, was a rasp. "Claudia, you must leave, it's dangerous here."

She closed the shutter, and the flame straightened up. "It's the emperor's fault," she told the comatose bodyguard. "He will keep subsidising theatrical productions, some of the drama's bound to rub off. Or could it be, Junius, that this aristocrat's simply jealous of Max?"

"This has nothing to do with— *Is that a betrothal ring on your finger?*"

"See what I mean?" she asked the welter of bloodstained bandages.

"It is! It's a betrothal ring! Claudia, you can't marry that man, he's worn out five wives already."

"Six has always been my lucky number."

"Fine!" He threw his hands in the air. "Fine. Do what you like, only for gods' sake, let's discuss this back in Rome. I have horses outside, we—"

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Claudia spun round to face him. "Who the bloody hell do you think you are? My guardian? My husband? I'm not one of your flunkies."

"You've got me wrong—"

"I haven't got you at all, and that's the root of it. You're jealous as hell that I'm here with Max, and moreover, I intend to stay here, Orbilio. I have Great Plans for my future—"

"As Soni had Great Plans for his!"

Claudia felt the ground shift underfoot. "Soni?"

"Dammit, he was one of our best undercover agents." Orbilio slammed a fist into the palm of his hand. "When he failed to report back, I came looking—only I can't find him anywhere."

The floorboards became marsh, and Claudia slumped down onto Junius's narrow pallet bed. "Soni's a *policeman?*"

"Of sorts," Marcus said. "Why?" She saw him stiffen. "Do you know anything about his disappearance?"

Claudia rubbed at her forehead. "Yes . . . No . . ." The room was spinning around her. Umbrian idylls crumbled to dust as she explained how Soni hadn't come home from the hunt.

"Shit." Orbilio sank onto the bed beside her and buried his head in his hands. "That means someone rumbled his cover and took the opportunity of this morning's excitement to kill him."

But how? When? Soni's idea of life insurance, once he knew he was suspected, was to keep himself in full view of the hunt. How could he possibly have been eliminated without witnesses? What was it the head bearer had said? *Now you see him, now you don't—*

"What—" Claudia could not bring herself to say "who." "What are you investigating?"

Orbilio spiked his hands through his hair, and when he spoke, his voice was weary. "Max," he said slowly, "makes too much money for my liking. I mean, look at this place, Claudia. A man doesn't make legitimate millions from stag hunts and bears! So I started making some enquiries and . . ."

"And what?"

For a long time, the only sound in the room was the shallow breathing of the unconscious bodyguard. Then: "I couldn't be certain—after all, the top echelon of Rome are visitors here. I had to tread softly. So I set up that business at the slave auction—"

Soni was a plant? "Goddammit, Orbilio, you set me up, too!"

That was no accidental meeting, that day in the Forum—Supersnoop had been waiting for her! He knew where she'd been, he knew where she was going, and on top of it all, he damn well knew Max would be there. Both of them, plums for the picking!

"I needed you to add authenticity," Marcus said. "That way, Max would suspect nothing and I'd have an undercover agent to sound

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out my theory." He scrubbed his eyeballs with his thumbs. "What the hell am I supposed to say to his mother?"

Several more minutes ticked past, and the candle guttered and spat.

"I think it's fair to say that, having rumbled Soni," Marcus said quietly, "they feared Junius was also a spy."

Nausea clogged Claudia's throat as she studied the comatose form on the bed. "His injuries aren't accidental?"

"Don't you think it's strange he has only head wounds? For a chap who supposedly tumbled down a ravine, it seems odd no bones were broken." He paused before adding, "I'm sure they believed they were bringing his corpse home to you."

Tears scalded Claudia's eyes. Sweet Jupiter, that might yet be the case. . . .

"What hunch were you working on?" Claudia asked, but her words were cut short as the door to the sickroom burst open, spilling bright orange light onto the floor.

"Seize him!"

Half a dozen men rushed into the room, grabbing a kicking, struggling, protesting Marcus and hauling him into the corridor. Claudia shot after them, but there were too many and Orbilio was quickly bundled down the slave wing, watched by a blond huntsman with Aegean-blue eyes.

"Where are you taking him?" Claudia demanded, but a strong arm shot out to restrain her.

"Stay out of this," Max growled. He needed both hands to contain his struggling fireball. "This is between Orbilio and me." To his men, he said, "Get a horse, tie him to it, then escort this *gentleman* to Rome."

"This is outrageous," Claudia hissed.

"I know," Max admitted. By the gods, she could squirm! "But I can't allow people to go around slandering me, particularly well-connected patrician policemen."

"He says—"

"I know what he says, and perhaps he genuinely believes I'm up to my ears in extortion or blackmail, but Jupiter's balls, I'm no gangster. I won't have the slur bandied about. Now, Orbilio's pride might be hurt, riding home hogtied, but it *will* only be pride."

He released her at last, leaving them both panting and red from exertion.

"What of his claim that Junius's injuries aren't consistent with a fall?" she spat, and to her astonishment, Max burst out laughing.

"Have you seen the bruises on that poor bugger's body? Junius hit his head on a rock, Claudia. Knocked himself out—and you know yourself what happens when drunks roll about. The body goes limp."

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Actually, that was true . . .

"Orbilio's problem," Max chuckled, "is not that I might be a gangster, not even that I make more money than Midas by ripping off rich bastards hand over fist. His problem is, I have *you!*"

Claudia slipped off her armband, the one set with carnelians and pearls, and ran it round and round in her hand. "Like you have Soni, you mean?"

Aegean blue eyes flickered briefly. "Soni," he said, "is a slave. Yes, I own slaves. Yes, unlike you, I don't treat them as equals. And yes, I've been married five times, if that's what you're driving at, but I never think of women as chattel." He drew a deep breath. "Whether you believe me or not is another matter," he added.

"Whether I believe you," she said slowly, "rests on my seeing Soni, face-to-face, right this minute."

An astonished expression crossed Max's face. "Are you serious?"

"Is there a problem?"

"No. No, of course not," he stuttered. "It's just that . . . It's just that I'm jealous, my love. I know I can't compete with a stripling half my age and whose pecs are solid steel, but . . . well, I'm not in bad shape and, unlike a slave, I can give you wealth unimaginable—"

Not unimaginable, Max. I've imagined it many times.

"I want to buy Soni," she snapped, "not sleep with the boy." If everything was aboveboard, then there would be no obstacle. Max had denied her nothing so far.

"Ah." For a moment, he faltered, then the old seductive laugh was back as he led her back through the lofty atrium, rich with its cedarwood oils. "In that case, darling, you must accept him as a gift, with my compliments. May he serve you as well as he's served me."

Claudia felt a tidal wave of relief wash over her. For once, Supersnoop was wide of the mark. Junius *had* simply cracked his head on a rock before falling down that ravine! But what of Soni?

Suppose, she thought, trailing her hand in the fountain as she passed, Max had decided to satisfy himself that Soni was all that he'd seemed? Soni's refusal to comply with a criminal act would have blown his cover right out of the water, and suddenly Claudia was extremely keen to meet the man who had staged his own disappearance in broad daylight without arousing suspicion and yet had returned with a convincing explanation!

Glancing at Max, suave and easy, Claudia found no problem in picturing him up to his ears in racketeering, using the hunts as a front, both to make deals at the highest of levels and also to enforce any threats. He led her into his office and clapped his hands. Immediately, a negro slave answered the call.

"Fetch Soni here, will you?"

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"Master?" The old man's face creased in a frown.

"Stop dithering, man. Just fetch him. Shoo!" Strong hands poured two goblets of rich honey mead, hesitating a fraction before handing her hers. "You—You aren't going to marry me, are you?" Max asked quietly.

"No," she admitted. "I'm not."

His gifts were welcome, of course—the tiaras, the ear studs. But the Great Plan had been to ingratiate herself with his wealthy clientele and sign them up for hefty consignments of Seferius wine. Well-oiled (thanks to Max), they'd be pushovers for good, vintage wine and would be in no mood to worry about loaded prices. Especially when the alternative was this sickly concoction. Yuk. Two parts thunderbolts, one part bile, it was watered down with three ladlefuls of the River Styx. No wonder they had to add honey!

"Claudia—"

His voice came from down a dark tunnel, and the tunnel was closing in all around.

"Claudia?"

The voice echoed like stones in a barrel and her vision grew cloudy. Bloody mead! Filthy stuff.

"Is everything all right, darling?"

"Perfectly."

But everything was not all right.

Jellified knees gave way. Lights went dim. And Claudia collapsed in a heap on the floor.

5.

Was she dead? Was this blackness Stygian gloom? There were no three-headed dogs about, but there was barking. Claudia tried to lift her head, and found it had been glued to the floor. When she finally raised it, she needed to hold it with both hands to prevent it rolling into the corner.

Except . . . Except her hands had been glued down, as well. She couldn't lift them. Ignoring the hammering inside her head, she tried harder. *And found not hangover lethargy, but ropes binding her tight.*

"I'm sorry it ended like this," said a familiar voice from the corner. The chair creaked when he stood up. "But you would keep pressing the subject of Soni. Oh, Claudia. If only you'd let it go."

Primeval creatures slithered down Claudia's spine. And how strange. High summer, yet her teeth were chattering . . . She struggled, but the knots were professional and her skin chafed itself raw.

"You know," when he knelt down, she could smell the leather of his boots, "you really are very lovely." He ran a hand gently down

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the length of her cheek. "Had your brain been full of feathers, we could have had a wonderful marriage and raised some damned good-looking kids." He sighed at what was not to be. "Unfortunately, though, dawn is breaking. Time to leave."

Cold. So very cold. "People will come looking for me," she gabbled. "Marcus, for one, won't let it drop—"

"Ah, but this is terrible country for bandits. So many tragic accidents can befall a beautiful woman." Either Max had thought it out carefully during the night, or else he'd done this before. "Oh, don't look like that." He dragged her to her feet and propelled her to the door. "I'm not so hardhearted that I won't pay for a lavish funeral tribute and endow the most magnificent of marble tombs you could imagine in a prominent position along the Appian Way."

"You spoil me."

The door cranked open and two hefty bearers pushed her into the pale pink dawn light. The barking escalated, and some of the dogs started baying. The sound, she realised with a chill, was caused by impatience. Their desire to get underway.

"Max?" Surely he wouldn't kill her? Not Max.

But Max clicked his fingers, and the bearers manhandled her into the courtyard, where eight fat city men in short tunics milled around. None looked in Claudia's direction. Terror gripped at her throat.

"Please—" She could hardly breathe. "Help me. For gods' sake, one of you, help me!"

Last night, these men were her friends. Business colleagues. They'd laughed at her jokes, given her contracts for rich, vintage wine.

A vice tightened round her ribcage. Oh, sweet Juno in heaven. It's not that they can't hear me. It's not that they imagine I'm drunk. They're not helping for the simple reason that they're busy. Checking spears and arrows and slings . . . And when they do glance around, it's not a terrified girl that they're seeing. *They're simply assessing the strength of their prey.*

The true horror of Max's hunting parties slammed into her, filleting every bone from her body. Finally she understood what had happened to Soni.

Why he had been way out in front of the others.

The slave, goddammit, was the quarry.

That's why Max only wanted the one. Only ever the one . . .

"You'll never get away with it," she cried as the cart bumped over the lawns. Past the peacocks. Past the watercourses. Past the shimmering manmade lakes rimmed with reeds.

"Wrong," Max replied as they approached the wooded hunting grounds. Behind, the bearers loped along at a steady rhythm, their dogs straining at the leash. "All over the empire, you'll find men

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bored with a quarter of a century's peace. Sons of warriors who've only ever heard about the clash of weapons, the bittersweet fear of hand-to-hand combat. And since they've never ridden into battle themselves, they hunt boar, they hunt stag, they hunt bear for their thrills and to affirm their manhood. Unfortunately, with some, that's not enough." Slowly, he reined in the horses. "Some seek a further dimension."

Aegean-blue eyes scanned her face.

"Can you imagine how much these men are prepared to pay to hunt humans? Thousands, Claudia. Thousands upon thousands, and you know the best part? There's an unlimited market out there. Oh, I know you're going to tell me your clever friend Marcus is on to me. He's suspected me for some time, but what can he prove? Nothing! Not one bloody thing."

Drawing a broad hunting knife, he cut through her bonds in a businesslike fashion. For how many others, she wondered, had he done this?

"You have intelligence, cunning, and resilience, Claudia Seferius; you will be a worthy adversary." Max took her trembling chin between his thumb and forefinger. "Your tomb will do you credit, I promise."

Claudia spat in his face. "Go to hell."

"I probably shall," he agreed. "Now then. We always give the quarry a chance. Here's a slingshot, a javelin, and a short stabbing dagger. Try," he whispered, glancing at the businessmen, "to take at least one of them with you."

Breath was too precious to waste on this son of a bitch; her mind whirled like a cap in the wind. The estate was fenced in; the gates closed behind them; guards were posted; and ferocious spikes topped the perimeter fence. What the hell chance did she have?

"We normally give a count of a hundred," he said, "but seeing as how you're a woman, I think two hundred is fair—"

Claudia made no effort to kill him. He'd be prepared, would only injure her, consigning her to a lingering death. She had no choice. She set off—a victim of the very men on whom, only last night, she had wished this particular fate.

Behind her, she could hear Max counting aloud. "Sixteen. Seventeen."

Father Mars. Mighty Jupiter. Can you hear me up on Olympus? Can you help?

"Twenty-two. Twenty-three."

"Nobody move, you're surrounded!"

For a second, Claudia's heart stopped beating.

"Drop your weapons, put your hands in the air."

Then the breath shot out of her lungs. That was no Olympian deity. That baritone was quite unmistakable, even through the

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shell he used as his loudspeaker—

As one, fifty archers stepped out from the bushes, their arrow tips aimed at the group. Almost before the daggers and javelins had crashed to the ground, eight men began babbling. Explaining. Exonerating. Bribing.

"You all right?"

Claudia hadn't realised she had collapsed until a strong hand pulled her up. Even then, her knees were so weak, the only way to stay upright was with his arm tight round her waist.

"Nothing better than a run in the country," she said, and it was odd, but her teeth were still chattering.

Orbilio grinned, and brushed the hair from her eyes with his thumb.

"I thought they'd run you out of town," she said.

"I was expecting some form of trouble," he replied. "Which is why I brought backup." He paused. "It took a little persuading, but eventually one of Max's heavies told us of Max's plans for you. Hence the trap we were able to lay overnight."

Behind him, pleading, protesting, terrified merchants were rounded up—men of substance, yet men of no substance at all—while the bearers tried to explain how they were under duress to obey, that they got drunk to blot out the horror, that if they didn't participate, they would become the next quarry. For many years afterwards Claudia was able to recall, with bloodcurdling clarity, everyone's clamouring at once. *While not one word of remorse fell from their lips.*

"You know this won't come to trial?" Orbilio said, steadying her with his grip. "Senior politicians and influential businessmen on slave hunts? The scandal would destabilise the empire in no time, Augustus wouldn't risk it."

"They'll get off?" The prospect of these scum swaggering free was almost too much to bear.

"No, no!" Orbilio was certain of that. "It's suicide for these boys," he said, leaving unspoken the fact that, in at least two cases, the exit would require a certain assistance.

The soldiers, meanwhile, were being none too gentle with their cargo, yet throughout the whole ignominious defeat, one man had said nothing. Outmanned and outnumbered, Max surrendered at once, quietly and without fuss, and stood, hands bound in front of him, as his rich clientele and his poor bullied bearers were kicked into the cart.

His passive acceptance alone should have alerted them.

"Shit!" shouted the captain of the archers. "After him!"

Sprinting through territory as familiar as his own back terrace, Max hurdled tree roots and obstacles with the grace and ease of a gazelle, heading deeper and deeper into the woods.

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"Wait." Orbilio's voice was calm. His authority stopped the men in their tracks. "This is his ground, we can't hope to either catch or outwit him. Soldier!"

A burly archer stepped up. "Sir."

Orbilio relieved him of his dark yew bow and weighted it in his hands. Carefully, he plucked an arrow from the quiver. Sweet Janus, the white tunic was now barely a dot!

"Marcus," breathed Claudia. "Leave this to the archer." So many trees in between, it needed an expert!

"This," said Orbilio, notching the arrow into his bow, "is for Soni."

Claudia felt her heart thump. "I'm just as much to blame as you are," she said. "I know you put him up as a plant, but it was my urging that bought him his grave."

The bow lifted.

"This," he repeated, "is personal."

With a hiss, the arrow departed. Silence descended on the clearing—the men in the cart, the soldiers, Claudia, Marcus—watching as one as the arrow took flight. No one breathed.

In front of them, the white dot grew smaller. Then, with a cry, Max fell forward. No one spoke. Not even when Max hauled himself to his knees, then his feet, and began running again . . .

The colour drained from Orbilio's face. "I winged him," he gasped. "Only winged him."

The arrow, they could see now, was lodged in his shoulder. Painful. But hardly life-threatening.

Orbilio wiped his hand over his face, as though the gesture might turn back time. Give him one more chance to make good.

Then—"Look!" Claudia pointed. Marcus followed her finger.

In the distance, a huge bristly boar came charging out of the undergrowth, tusks lowered. His furious snorting could be heard in the clearing. As though in slow motion, they watched as he lunged at the figure in white. They watched, too, as Max tried to duck, turn away, but the wily old boar had been there before.

This was the mating season, remember.

He had sows and a territory to protect. . . . ●

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THE SPY AND THE MINOTAUR

by Edward D. Hoch

The International Donkey Protection Trust employed in Edward D. Hoch's new Rand story actually exists—and has been incorporated into the plot of at least one previous Hoch whodunit. Though it is set on the island of Crete, this new story's plot touches on the September 11th attacks on New York City. It is the first *EQMM* story to refer to the tragedy.

The man from MI6 was new since Rand's time, and as they sat in his office overlooking the Thames he outlined the nature of the mission as if he were instructing the newest man in the department. Rand took about three minutes of it before he raised his hand. "I'm afraid you have the wrong man, Sir Michael. I've been retired from Concealed Communications for years, and even when I headed up the department I was never a field agent."

Sir Michael Bradford was a soft-spoken, slender man with a halo of white hair around a bald spot at the top of his head. His appearance and demeanor put Rand in mind of a cloistered monk who'd somehow escaped into the outer world. "You don't seem to understand, Mr. Rand," he said quietly. "We are quite aware of your record as head of Double-C, and in the years since your retirement. Naturally, we'd like a younger man for this assignment, but you are the only person with the necessary qualifications. Of course, we can't order you to take it on. We can only point out its vital importance to Britain and its allies." He paused for a moment, shifting a few items on his desk, then added, "Crete in October can be a very pleasant place. Temperatures around seventy and only a few rainy days. Will you do it?"

"No," Rand answered at once. "I doubt that I'd agree if the prime minister himself asked me."

Sir Michael considered it for a moment and then reached for the red telephone on his desk. "Let's see about that."

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When Rand related the conversation to his wife at home that evening, Leila could hardly believe it. "You actually spoke with the prime minister?"

"It certainly sounded like him."

"How could you say no to the prime minister?"

"I couldn't. I'm going."

"To Crete? There's no one else they can send to Crete?"

He knew the news would upset her. "I'm the only one with the proper qualifications. With this whole terrorist thing, after what happened in New York and all, I could hardly say no."

"What qualifications?" she asked.

"A knowledge of digital photography as a method of concealing secret messages. Remember? I wrote an article on the subject for *Counterpane,* the Internet security magazine, last year. Naturally that went into my personnel file at British Intelligence. My other qualification is that I know Laura Peters. She insists the contact be someone she knows and can trust."

"Laura Peters. Where have I heard that name before?"

"Nearly seven years ago, on the island of Lamu, off the coast of Kenya. You had gone home after our Egyptian trip that year and I went on alone."

Then she remembered. "Those American spies, Ryder and his wife! And Laura Peters was—"

"The donkey lady. She's with the International Donkey Protection Trust, setting up donkey sanctuaries in various remote areas. Somehow she's the key to this business on Crete, and she won't talk to a stranger."

"Is it safe, Jeffery?" Leila asked.

"What's safe these days? Perhaps we'll never really be safe again. Anyway, I leave tomorrow. It shouldn't take more than a day or two. Come along, if you'd like."

"You know I can't get away from the university at the start of a term. But I don't like you going there."

"It's not Afghanistan or Iraq. What could happen to me on Crete?"

"There's always the Minotaur," she replied, only half in jest.

Oddly enough, the gift shop at the Herakleion Airport on Crete carried no Minotaur-inspired toys like the "Nessy" images so popular with visitors to Loch Ness. Rand saw only some reproductions of Minotaur artwork by Picasso and Dali. Perhaps the idea of a man with the head of a bull was not so attractive as a gliding sea serpent in the cool waters of a Scottish lake. When he asked the clerk for a map of the Minotaur's maze, she replied brusquely, "That is all myth."

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He checked in at the Xenia Hotel, overlooking the waters of the Cretan Sea. It was a quiet place with a spectacular harbor view, and once in his room he phoned Leila back in England to confirm that he'd arrived safely. "I suppose you're going down to the beach," she said.

"No, there are mostly fishing boats in this area. The city has some sort of wine festival in progress, but I guess I'd better stick to business."

"You'd better," she agreed. "Take care. I'm getting too old to come rescue you."

Next Rand placed a call to the British Embassy in Athens and was switched briefly to a man named Foxfell who would be his contact there. "Have you encountered any old friends?" Foxfell asked.

"Not yet."

"Keep us informed."

Rand had an address for the International Donkey Protection Trust, and Sir Michael had advised against phoning first. "If they're on to her, the line may not be secure. We mustn't endanger her in any way." So Rand made his way into the city center, past colorful flower markets and busy outdoor taverns. The buildings, many a mere two or three stories high, served as homes to more than a hundred thousand people. He was dressed casually, like most others, wearing a hat and dark glasses against an afternoon sun that was warmer than he'd been led to expect.

The address he sought was near the Morosini Fountain, an intricately carved wonder that gushed water into a basin whose raised sides formed eight segments, rather like a snowflake. Bas-relief scenes along the sides portrayed sea gods, and nymphs riding the backs of dolphins. The entire area was a lively meeting place with cafes, bookstalls, and shops. But he realized it was siesta time, after three o'clock. He assumed that wouldn't matter to an Englishwoman like Laura Peters, but most shops in the area were closed until five, and when he reached the Donkey Trust building he found it was closed, too. He walked around the back of the long, low building through a vacant lot and saw from the faded sign on its exterior wall that it had once been a fish market. The donkeys apparently were kept inside since there was no outside pen for them.

Rand was casually examining the sign for the former fish market when a chip of plaster flew off the wall not a foot in front of his face. He dropped instinctively to the ground. Someone had fired a shot from a silenced gun, and he'd been the target. He crawled a few feet along the wall, afraid to raise his head until he came to a side door covered with sheet metal. Certain it would be locked, he reached up and quickly tried the knob. The door opened and he slithered inside.

The first thing he heard was the braying of a donkey in one of

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the stalls nearby. As he accustomed his eyes to the dim light, he could make out a second donkey and a row of stalls, with a small office and desk beyond. The rest of the long building seemed piled with supplies: rows of donkey feed and medications for treating them. But his attention went to the glass-enclosed office, where a woman was slumped over the desk, her head hidden by a mop of brownish hair. Rand saw the blood and knew she was dead, and was certain he'd come too late to contact Laura Peters.

Then he pushed back the hair from her face and saw that it was not Laura at all, but an older woman with dark Mediterranean features. She'd been shot once in the back of the head. Perhaps the killer, too, had mistaken her for Laura Peters. Rand hurried to the back door and opened it enough to peer out, but across the vacant lot there was no sign of the gunman who'd fired at him.

At the same moment, he heard a noise at the building's front door, a key in the lock. He slipped into a stall with one of the donkeys and waited silently. When the animal brayed, Rand tried to silence it with his hand and only succeeded in getting licked.

"Who's there?" a woman's voice called out. She had a British accent, and even after seven years he was pretty certain it was Laura Peters.

"Laura," he called softly, but then she saw the body and let out a scream.

He was on her in an instant, covering her mouth. "Be quiet! It's Jeffery Rand. You know me from Lamu."

She relaxed a bit and he took his hand from her mouth. She was wearing a gray tunic that reached just below her knees, with a green vest over it. Her brown hair was shorter than he remembered. "Did you kill Rachel?" she asked.

"Of course not! I think the killer took a shot at me, too. Did she work with you?"

Laura nodded. "Rachel Dikte. She lived here in Herakleion. I hired her to handle the donkeys and the supplies."

"You have to report this to the police."

"The killer thought it was me, didn't he?"

"I don't know," he told her. "We have to find someplace to talk."

She composed herself as best she could. "You get out of here and I'll phone for the police. I'll try to meet you in two hours at the Church of St. Peter. It's just a couple of blocks away."

"In case you're not there, give me a number where you can be reached."

But Laura shook her head. "The phone lines aren't safe. What hotel are you at?"

"The Xenia."

"If I'm not at the church in two hours I'll contact you there. Now get out while I call the police."

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Rand hardly expected her to turn up at the church, but she was there, kneeling in prayer with a black veil over her face. He knelt beside her for a few moments and then she whispered, "Were you followed?"

"No."

"I'll leave first. Wait five minutes and then follow me. I'll be at the Myrto. It's a little bar on an isolated beach and it's never crowded this late in the season. Do you have the name?"

"Myrto," he repeated. "I'll find it."

His guidebook indicated it was a long walk, so he took a cab to a nearby corner and went the last few blocks on foot. She was seated alone at a table for two in a back room. There were only a few other customers at the bar. "Sorry for all this," she told him at once. "When I saw Rachel's body I went a little paranoid. How've you been?"

"Pretty good for a man my age."

"Your hair is gray now."

He smiled at her. "It happens."

"I can't trust anyone. I told your man in Athens it had to be someone I knew. I was surprised when they dug you up."

They ordered some food from the waiter and Laura suggested a bottle of raki. "That's what the festival is all about," she explained. "It's a local liquor distilled from grain, grapes, and plums."

"I'll try a little of it. I'm not much of a drinker. Now tell me why I'm here and why that woman back at the Donkey Trust is dead."

"The second part is easy. She's dead because they thought it was me. I'm usually there alone."

Rand remembered from their previous meeting that the International Donkey Protection Trust of Sidmouth, Devon, existed to provide rest and sanctuary for injured, sick, and tired donkeys. Laura was paid to find these animals and nurse them back to health, and she told him she'd spent much of the last decade in Africa and the Mediterranean on her mission. "What is it you're involved in?" he asked. "Protecting donkeys is a long way from steganography."

"From what?"

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "It's a technical term for a method of hiding messages in digital photographs or music files transmitted through the Internet. I wrote an article about it for a magazine, which is one of the reasons I'm here. The other reason is you, of course."

He tasted some of the raki and made a face. "You don't like it," she observed.

"It's a taste that takes getting used to. We'll see. Tell me, did you have any trouble with the police?"

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"No, they came and wrote up a report and took away Rachel's body. They're assuming it was an attempted robbery."

"What's there to steal, except some sick donkeys?"

"Exactly, but I didn't tell them that. Let them think what they want."

"Before I entered through your back door and found her body, someone took a shot at me, too. I assume it was the killer, who thought I might have seen him fleeing the place."

"Did you?"

"No. When I found the front door locked I was merely seeking another entrance. But tell me your story, and how British Intelligence became involved."

She downed some of the raki and began. "I've been here about eight months, working mostly alone out of that building. I hired Rachel Dikte back in June to help me out on a part-time basis. Mostly she looked after the donkeys while I scouted out new clients in the nearby vineyards. You wouldn't believe how they treat their donkeys! When I find sick or injured ones I can usually persuade their owners to let me nurse them back to health. Then I load them in my van and bring them back here, all the while wearing a tunic or dress. They frown on women wearing trousers on Crete."

She'd always been a talker. "What about the digital messages?" he asked.

"I met a man named Carlos Vultura who offered to set up a Web site on the Internet for the Donkey Trust, or the Donkey Sanctuary as it's now called. I already had a second phone line for my computer, and the only additional expense would be having it on all the time so the Web page is accessible day and night. He said I could even have a link to the sanctuary's main Web page in England. I had to admit it made sense. Most of our vineyards are on the Internet, and if some of them would contact me about their donkeys it would save me a good deal of chasing around the countryside. Carlos started coming into my office in the afternoons, working on the Web site. It looked quite nice, with a full-color photograph of a donkey at the top of the page. Then one afternoon a few weeks back I returned to the office unexpectedly while he was working. It seemed to unnerve him and he shuffled some papers out of sight. Later, I found one on the floor that he'd missed. There were a couple of dozen handwritten names on it, mostly Arab names, each followed by a string of numbers. I put it in my drawer, intending to return it to him, but it slipped my mind."

"This was a few weeks ago?"

Laura Peters nodded. "Just after the terrorist attacks on New York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Later, when newspapers published the names of the terrorists who had hijacked those airliners, I dug out that list again. More than half the names

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were on it. I didn't know what to do, but I had to do something. There was no one I could trust on Crete, and I didn't want to report it to our headquarters back in Devon. Finally, last week, I put in a call to the British embassy in Athens. I told them I might have information about the September Eleventh attacks, and that a list of names may have been hidden somehow on the Internet. I didn't mention the Donkey Trust site. I said I would only talk to someone I knew or whose identity could be verified by London. I guess that's when they sent you."

"You said there were numbers following the names. Do you remember any of them?"

"Some were 11901. As you know, that could be the European manner of writing the date 11 September 2001."

"Have you seen this man Vultura lately?"

"Not around here, but I see him at a small tavern he owns. That's where I first met him."

"Has he been at your refuge since that day you surprised him?"

"Now that you mention it, I don't think he has. That's why I never thought to return the list to him."

When their food came, she asked him about steganography. "What kind of a word is that, anyway?"

"It's Greek for 'hidden writing,' " Rand explained. "In ancient Greece, a message was written on a wooden tablet and covered with wax. The recipient scraped off the wax to read the message. In Internet use, steganography takes advantage of the fact that digital files can be slightly altered and still look almost the same to the human eye. Hidden messages have been found on pornographic Web sites, music sites, and even the eBay auction site. The great advantage is that there is no contact between sender and recipient. For example, the digital image of your donkey could be downloaded anonymously and its message read by anyone who knows the technique."

"Have terrorists actually used this method of communication?"

"Oh yes. It was used by a recently apprehended group planning to blow up the United States embassy in Paris. They did all their communicating through pictures posted on the Internet. I think we can assume that the September Eleventh terrorists used it, too. That list of names you possess could be invaluable."

"I'm ready to turn it over to you. It's still in my desk."

"If this Vultura tried to kill you for that list, he now realizes his mistake in killing Rachel. Your life could be in danger."

"I know that."

Rand thought about it as he finished the last of his raki. "I think I'd like to meet Carlos Vultura."

"What for?"

"I feel like walking into the lion's den. Let's go over to his tav-

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ern after dinner."

"People will see us together," she pointed out.

"I'm sure the word has already gotten around. That bartender picked up the telephone as soon as he saw me sit down with you."

The Taverna Minotaur was a small storefront with a few tables in front, all unoccupied at the moment. "It's a nice place," Laura told him. "On summer nights they often have Greek dancing here in the street." A slender man carrying a menu walked toward them with just the suggestion of a limp. He wore a bushy moustache like many of the local men. "Carlos, I want you to meet a friend of mine, Jeffery Rand."

The tavern owner smiled to show off a gold tooth. "Good evening, Mr. Rand. Welcome to our little watering place. Do you know Laura from England?"

"From Africa, actually," she told him. "We met when I was tending to donkeys on an island off the coast of Kenya."

"Could I tempt you with some local delicacies? We have fine fresh octopus, caught daily just offshore."

"Thank you," Rand told him, "but we've just eaten."

He took their orders for a local beer and then asked Laura, "Are you getting any reaction to the new Web site?"

"Yes, and all of it favorable. You've been a great help to me."

When he retreated to fill their order Rand asked, "What happened to his leg?"

"Gored during the running of the bulls in Spain, back when he was young. He likes to tell people it was a Minotaur, but there are some who'll tell you he's the Minotaur himself. His reputation is a bit shady, though he's always been a gentleman around me."

"He was after something else with you and the Donkey Trust Web site."

"It seems like it," she agreed.

She had to go back to check on the donkeys and Rand couldn't allow her to go alone. The streets were still crowded with noisy festivalgoers celebrating the distillation of raki. When they reached it, the office with its donkey stable was just as it had been on his earlier visit, though he was relieved to see that Rachel Dikte's body had been removed.

While Laura checked over her charges, Rand said, "You could give me that list now and I'd be on my way tomorrow."

She went to the desk and opened a bottom drawer. "It's right—" The color drained from her face. "It was here this morning. Whoever killed Rachel must have taken it."

"Perhaps that's what he was after."

He walked with her to her nearby apartment, arranging to meet

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her there the following morning. Then he made his way back through the streets to his hotel. He didn't like the way this whole thing was developing. Stopping at the hotel desk, he asked the room clerk for a favor.

In the morning he was awakened by the gentle ringing of his bedside phone. It was not yet eight o'clock and he wondered who might be calling him at such an early hour. "Good morning. This is your friend from Athens," the voice announced, and he recognized Foxfell, the man he'd called when he arrived the previous day. "I am in the lobby. May I come up?"

Rand sat up. "In this lobby? Here?"

"Yes."

"Give me five minutes."

There was no time to shower, but he brushed his teeth and dressed quickly. He was running the electric razor over his face when the door chime sounded. Sam Foxfell proved to be a sturdy man in his forties with rimless glasses and hair just beginning to gray. He showed Rand his British Embassy identification, which gave no hint of ties to MI6. "Sorry to be here so early, Mr. Rand, but things have taken a bad turn."

"How is that?" Rand shut the door behind him.

"A woman named Rachel Dikte has been murdered. She worked at the Donkey Trust."

"I know. I was there when the body was found."

"Oh? We believe we know the identity of her killer."

Rand hazarded a guess. "A man named Vultura, right?"

"We know about Vultura. He certainly has criminal connections but he's no terrorist."

"He designed a Web page for the Donkey Trust. That's how the digital messages are being transmitted to terrorist cells around the world."

"We know that, but the messages weren't placed there by Vultura. It was Laura Peters."

"Laura? That's crazy. She's the one who alerted you."

"We believe now that was only a cover-up for her own involvement. London is convinced she is an important cog in the terrorist network."

"I don't believe it," Rand said firmly.

Foxfell slipped a folded paper from an inside pocket. "I have here a list of the countries in which she has worked for the Donkey Trust during the past decade. You'll note that several of them like Somalia and Yemen have served as sanctuaries for terrorist groups."

Rand handed back the list with barely a glance. "These are countries where donkeys are used and often mistreated. It stands to reason they'd be places where the Donkey Trust would be active."

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"I don't think you fully comprehend the task we're facing, Mr. Rand. No one is safe from terrorist attacks. These are times that call for harsh measures."

"Against a young woman trying to protect animals?"

"Some of these people can turn to violence, as you know. In England, animal rights groups have staged a number of raids—"

Rand interrupted to ask, "How can you believe she was responsible for Rachel Dikte's death?"

"We have a strong suspicion."

"Based on what?"

The embassy man sighed. "You say you were there when the body was found. Suppose you tell me exactly what happened."

Rand told about entering the building and seeing the body, then about Laura's arrival. "She arranged to meet me two hours later, after the police had been notified."

Foxfell's lips curled into a little smile of triumph. "The police were never notified."

"What?"

"Dikte's body was found late last evening in the shallow water of Venetian Harbor, some distance from the Donkey Trust building. I was called at once by my contact with the police who knew of my interest in Laura Peters and her operations here. I flew down overnight."

"That doesn't make any sense!" Rand protested. "Why would Laura move the body?"

"Perhaps because it would incriminate her if found at her office." He reached into his pocket again and took out a vial of colorless liquid. "We need to search her place, undetected. I want you to slip this into her coffee or beer or whatever. It's harmless but it'll put her to sleep."

Rand shook his head. "No. That's out of my line. I've never done that sort of work and I'm not going to start now."

"I have my instructions from the top—"

"No," Rand repeated. "I don't kill people."

"I told you it's harmless."

"I'm not risking her life on whether or not you're telling the truth."

Foxfell's eyes hardened, but he returned the vial to his pocket. "I'll have to contact London about this."

"You do that."

Rand reached Laura's apartment a little after ten. "Before we go to the Donkey Trust I think we should talk," he told her.

"What about?"

"Did you contact the police after we found Rachel Dikte's body yesterday?"

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"Why do you ask?"

"Her body was pulled from the harbor last night. I doubt if the police put it there."

She sighed and glanced around, motioning him inside. The apartment was almost Spartan in its décor, with only a photograph of Laura and some others with a donkey decorating one wall. He sat on the sofa while she talked. "After you left I decided against calling the police. Nothing they could do would bring Rachel back, and they might even close the sanctuary. I've had trouble with the authorities in the past. Finally I called a friend named Kanakis to help."

"Who's he?"

"Aristide Kanakis, a local carpenter who built the stables for my donkeys. He's been very helpful around the place."

"In removing bodies?"

She flushed a bit. "He said he'd give her a proper burial. I never dreamed he'd dump her in the harbor. He wrapped the body and took it away in his truck."

"That was a foolish thing to do. Now the embassy people think you might have killed her. Let's go have a talk with this Kanakis person."

"He's probably out on a job. I can try reaching him on his cell phone."

Even on Crete one couldn't get away from them, Rand marveled, as Laura produced one from her own purse and pressed a button for speed-dialing. It was answered immediately and she said, "Aristide, this is Laura. It's important I talk to you. Where are you now?" She listened and said, "I'll be there in ten minutes. I have an English friend with me."

"Where is he?" Rand asked after she put away the phone.

"At the Church of St. Mark, near Venizelos Square. It's back toward the Donkey Trust."

"Another church?"

"This one is a cultural center now."

When they reached the place, they found Kanakis building a ramp to allow easier handicapped access to the old church, a spectacular mixture of Gothic and Renaissance styles that presently housed an exhibition of art from the Byzantine period. Kanakis was a bearded man with glistening brown eyes who shook Rand's hand with a smooth and vigorous palm. "You are a tourist in Crete?" he asked in passable English.

"Business and pleasure," Rand answered with a shrug.

Glancing about to make sure they were not overheard, Laura asked, "Aristide, what did you do with Rachel yesterday?"

He was reluctant to answer in front of Rand. Finally, after she insisted on knowing, he said, "The field I'd planned on was in use as a festival site. I drove around until dark without finding

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another place. Finally I took her to the harbor. I am sorry, Laura."

She hung her head in despair. "What have I gotten myself into?"

"Did you examine the body?" Rand asked the bearded man.

"As little as possible. I don't like dead bodies. She'd been shot once in the head with a silenced pistol."

"Could the killer have mistaken her for Laura?"

"I don't see how, unless the lights were out. Rachel's hair was a lot longer."

"Did you mop up the blood?"

"I did that," Laura answered. "I suppose I should tell the police everything."

"Let's wait a bit," Rand suggested. Then, to Kanakis, "Did you ever notice anyone hanging around the Donkey Trust?"

He shook his head. "But I wasn't around that much, only when Laura needed some carpentry work or heavy lifting."

"Like bodies?"

He heard her sharp intake of breath at his words, but Kanakis leaped to her defense. "You must be crazy if you think she killed Rachel. It was probably some thief she caught searching for money."

"That's not too likely when she was shot in the back of the head while seated at the desk. She wouldn't have turned her back on a robber, not even to call the police."

Kanakis picked up a board and went back to his work on the ramp. "Let me know if you find out anything." Then, to Laura, "I'm sorry about yesterday."

"I shouldn't have asked you to do it. I made a big mistake."

Rand thought of Sam Foxfell with his vial of colorless liquid and had to agree with her.

They headed for the Donkey Trust under cloudy skies that hinted at one of the island's rare autumn rainstorms. It had been a foggy morning when he awoke but now the wind was picking up. At Laura's workplace he spent some time examining the desk at which Rachel had been seated when she died. One end of it was occupied by the computer, and it seemed likely she might have been working on it when she was shot. He was sure the screen had been blank when he found the body, but the killer might have turned it off.

"There's nothing of value kept here?" Rand asked Laura as he paced around the piles of supplies. "What are all these blankets for?"

She smiled. "To keep the donkeys warm, of course. Winter nights can get chilly."

Wandering up and down the aisles he remarked, "How do you find what you need? This place is like a maze."

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"Then Crete is the right place for it."

He opened a file drawer at random. "What are these?"

"I take pictures of all our clients."

"By clients you mean donkeys?"

"Sure."

They were suddenly interrupted by the arrival of Carlos Vultura, blown into the place like an ill wind. "I just learned that they found Rachel's body," he said. "What happened?"

"You know as much as we do," Laura told him.

"Could it have been suicide?"

"I understand she'd been shot."

"My God! This is becoming a dangerous place to live."

"It always has been," Laura replied, "since the Minotaur."

One of the donkeys brayed and Vultura was reminded of something else. "Your Web site is down. Did you know that?"

She seemed puzzled. "It was working this morning." Going to the computer, she tried to call up the Web-site files. "They're gone! They've been deleted!"

"No problem," he assured her. "I can restore the old site or design a new one for you when I get back from Athens day after tomorrow. I have to fly there tonight if the airport's open."

"But what could have happened to it?"

"You say it was on the Web this morning?"

Laura nodded. "I check the counter occasionally from my apartment to see how many people have visited the site. How could anyone have deleted it?"

"Only through this machine, unless they hacked into it from outside."

The thought occurred to Rand that Vultura, as designer of the Web site, might know exactly how to do that. "How many people have keys to this place?" he asked Laura.

"No one besides me. Rachel didn't even have one, though at times like yesterday I left her alone while I went out after donkeys."

Rand was remembering her arrival. "You didn't have a donkey when you got back here."

"I was called to one of the vineyards, but the animal died before I arrived."

Something Vultura said had stuck in Rand's mind. "You're flying to Athens tonight if the airport's open? Why wouldn't it be?"

"It was closed all last night by the fog, but if this wind keeps up it should clear the air."

"Interesting."

"I should be all right until you get back," Laura told Vultura. "I'll post a simple message on the Web site with my phone number."

After he'd departed, Rand remarked, "He does try to be helpful."

"Too helpful. I might believe him if I hadn't found that sheet of

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names in his handwriting. But why would he or anyone else have deleted my Web page?"

"Steganography is only a practical method of cryptography if the enemy doesn't suspect you're using it. That's why some of their favorite digitized pictures are pornography, auction items, and the like—photos that might be downloaded by thousands of people without arousing suspicion. The minor digital data added to the photos results in a picture not quite as sharp as the original, and once experts spot it they can read it with a minimum of effort. Of course the added information can also be encrypted, but then the recipient needs the code book or key to decipher it. After what happened to Rachel yesterday, someone decided the donkey Web page had to be deleted for now, before the information fell into the wrong hands. If the killer stole that list from your drawer when he shot Rachel, he might have returned this morning and deleted the Web page."

He'd gotten to his feet. "Where are you going now?" she asked.

"I want to check with the airport about last night's flights being grounded."

"Why is that so important?"

"I'm not sure that it is. I'll be back later. Be careful who you let in. Rachel probably knew her killer."

Before he could reach his hotel, a limousine with diplomatic plates drew up alongside him. Foxfell was seated in back and he opened the rear door for Rand. "Get in, sir. I've been in touch with London."

"All right." Rand slid in next to him and the driver pulled away from the curb.

"Sir Michael says you are to follow my orders in this matter."

"Does Sir Michael know you've been here on Crete since before I arrived?"

He seemed puzzled. "What?"

"The airport was closed last night because of the fog, so you couldn't have flown in. I imagine you came over on the ferry with this car some days ago. When I phoned you in Athens the call was switched down here."

"They said you were smart," Foxfell said with a sigh. "But that doesn't really change the situation. You're still under orders."

"The Donkey Trust Web site has been deleted, probably by the same person who killed Rachel Dikte."

"Who may be Laura Peters herself."

"No. If she was sending instructions to terrorists on her Web site, she'd hardly have reported it to you."

"We don't want to harm her. We only want her to sleep a bit so the Donkey Trust can be searched."

"I'll take her to dinner. You can search it then."

"I'm told she has a great many files and supplies there. It would

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take hours to do a thorough search."

"Then you're out of luck. She's not going to be harmed in any way, by you or anyone else."

"Don't be too sure of that, Mr. Rand."

There was no need to call the airport about the previous night's fog. Foxfell had admitted he'd been on the scene all along. In fact, he must have been already on Crete when Rachel was killed. Rand thought about that back in his room, and about the deleted Web site. And about the bullet that had almost killed him the previous day.

Suddenly he knew he had to get back to the Donkey Trust. He'd been a fool to leave her alone. There was a taxi waiting outside the hotel and he grabbed it, shouting the address at the driver. The work day had ended, but crowds for the festival were gathering again. Ten minutes later, Rand was forced to abandon the cab and go the last few blocks on foot.

The street door was unlocked and he entered, hearing at first only the braying of the donkeys. The little office was empty. She was not in sight. "Laura!" he called.

There was a scuffling sound from back among the piles of supplies. "Rand! He's got a gun!"

He hurried down the nearest aisle, past the pile of donkey blankets and the filing cabinets, then left to a wooden wall formed by the row of stalls. The place was like a maze, as he'd told her himself. "Laura! Where are you?"

There was a soft popping sound as something thudded into the boxes of donkey meal by his side. The silenced pistol again, as close as the last time. "Rand!" she called again.

For only an instant did he consider the possibility that there was no Minotaur, that Laura herself was the Minotaur luring him to his destruction. Then he rounded the last corner and saw her, held in the grip of the man he sought. And, of course, as he'd known, it was the carpenter, Kanakis.

At that moment, a smoke bomb went off over their heads. Sam Foxfell had a great sense of the dramatic.

Later, when Kanakis had been overpowered and taken away, and Laura and Rand had cleared their lungs and eyes of the smoke, Foxfell sat down with them. "Of course I had you followed," he told Rand at once. "It wouldn't have looked very good for me to let you get killed. My man told me Kanakis was in the building, too, so we moved in, just in case."

"I have to say you both arrived just in time," Laura admitted. "Kanakis stopped by, as he often did, and I thought nothing of it till I saw that gun with its silencer. That was just as you entered, and he pulled me behind a stack of boxes."

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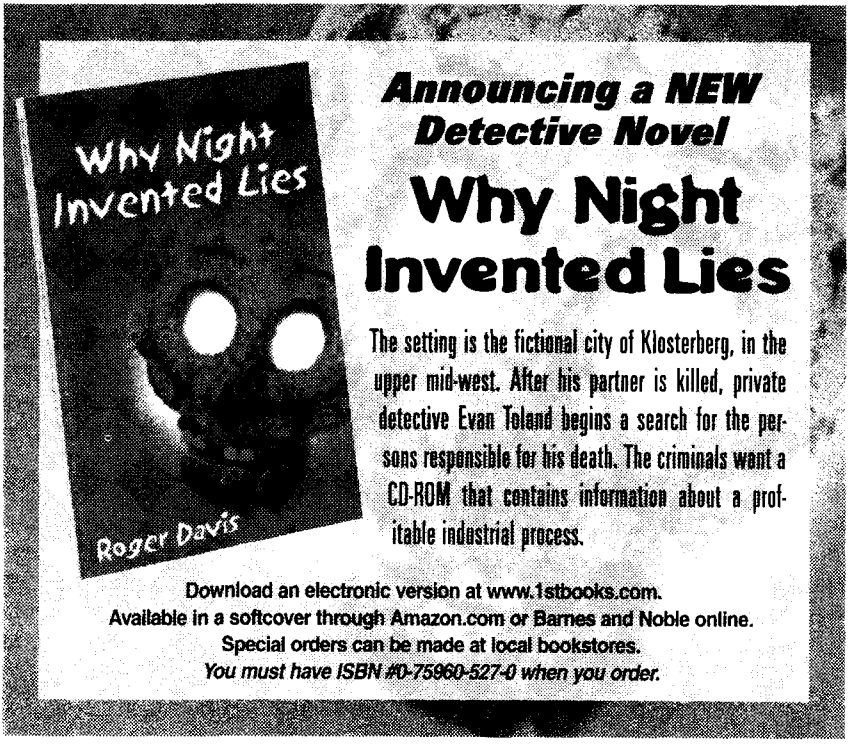
Rand nodded. "Into the maze. I was suspicious of Kanakis for two reasons. When we shook hands his palm seemed much too smooth to have worked as a carpenter for very long. And he mentioned Rachel's killer had a silenced pistol. I hadn't told anyone that. He knew it because he was the killer. No doubt he made a duplicate key to the building while he was building your donkey stalls. Once Vultura set up your Web site he sneaked in here and made his own alterations to the photograph of the donkey, incorporating lists of names and dates for terrorist cells in various countries. Vultura noticed the photo on the Web site wasn't as sharp as it had been and he came here to investigate. He used his own software to read the hidden digital message and was copying down those names when you surprised him. That was the list you found. Yesterday, Rachel must have come upon that list while Kanakis was here. He killed her and stole it, taking a shot at me while he escaped. It was ironic that you later called on him to dispose of her body."

"Now we'll never see the full list," Foxfell said, "not with her Web site deleted."

Rand smiled and slipped a folded sheet of paper from his pocket. "I learned long ago not to take chances. Back at my hotel last night I asked to use their computer. I downloaded the donkey photograph before Kanakis had a chance to delete the site." He handed the picture to Foxfell. "The rest is up to you." ●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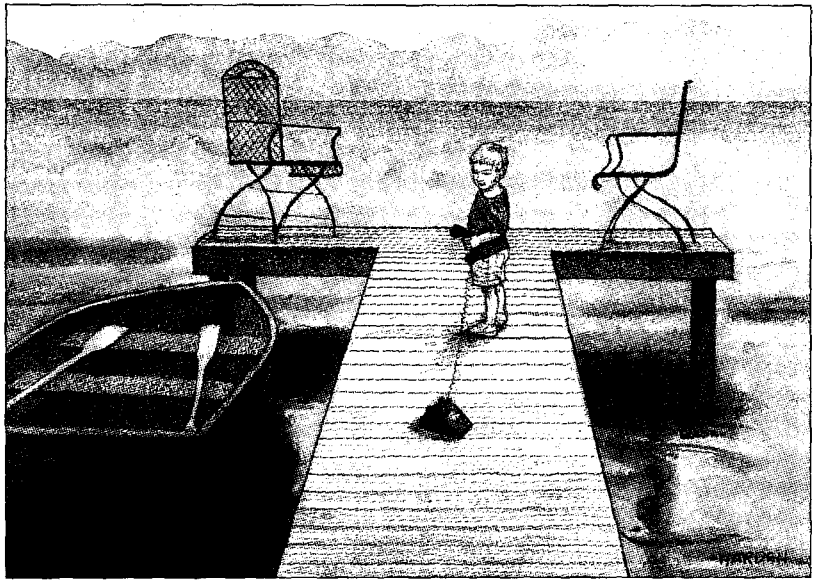

Art by Laurie Harden

TELEPHONE TO FOREVER

by Doug Allyn

"Your new apartment is lovely," CeeJay said. It wasn't an idle remark. Champagne Berber carpet, Queen Anne furniture, a panoramic view of the Detroit River twenty stories down. Wow.

"It'll do, I suppose," Sara said doubtfully. "It still feels temporary to me. Like living in a hotel." She was cradling her dozing daughter in her arms, rocking her.

Across the living room, Sara's son Colin was pushing his fire truck up and down the hallway, chatting merrily on his toy telephone. The new American compulsion. Driving under the influence. Of AT&T.

Sara Klein and Dr. Catherine Jane McKenzie, "CeeJay," were a contrast in style. Slender, dark-haired, and pert as a sparrow, Sara was a fashion statement in a teal and black Armani lounging suit.

CeeJay, her closest friend, was tall, lanky, with red hair and freckles. Her L. L. Bean blazer and jeans were acceptable at the clinic, but no one would ever mistake her for a mannequin.

"Mom? Do you want to talk to Grandpa?" Colin asked, holding

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his hand over the receiver of the toy phone.

Sara glanced pointedly at CeeJay. "No, honey, I'm talking to Dr. McKenzie now. Tell Grandfather goodbye for me, okay?"

"Okay. 'Bye, Grandpa. Mom says 'bye, too." Colin listened a moment, then chortled. "I love you, too. Gotta go now, 'bye." Tossing the toy telephone aside, he pushed his fire truck down the hallway as fast as his chubby little knees could carry him.

"When did his grandfather die?" CeeJay asked quietly.

"Eight months ago. But Dad was quite ill during the last two years. Alzheimer's. Pretty drifty most of the time. He and Colin would chat sometimes but they weren't really close. They talk a lot more since Dad died than they ever did when he was alive."

"It's not unusual for a child to develop imaginary friends."

"Imaginary, yes. But my father is real. Or was, I should say. And it isn't just that Colin talks to Dad. He says his grandfather talks to him. I was reading this article in *Psychology Today* about bipolar dysfunction in children—"

"Whoa, slow down," CeeJay said. "You're overreacting. Bipolar has dozens of symptoms."

"But hearing voices is one of them."

"It can be, sure. And the Black Plague can begin with a fleabite. That doesn't mean—"

"Don't patronize me!" Sara snapped. "I'm serious about this! Sometimes Colin just sits in a corner hunched over that damned toy telephone, not saying a word, just listening. It's eerie. It's scaring me, CeeJay, and God knows I've got enough crap to deal with."

"Your divorce, you mean?"

"Don's being a complete ass. He not only wants half of everything we own, he claims he's entitled to half the money from any new books I write because he supposedly helped build my career. What a joke! He begrudged every second I spent writing. Said it was all a pipe dream! And the Brits want to renegotiate my royalty percentage and— What are you smiling about?"

"Just remembering." CeeJay shrugged. "Two years ago we were

"Sometimes the best way to deal with our ghosts is to write about them," says author Doug Allyn, who exorcised a few from his own life in the construction of this new tale. Mr. Allyn is a five-time *EQMM* Readers Award winner; his distinctive blend of action, adventure, mystery, and appealing characterization makes it easy to see why he so often makes it to the top of your Readers Award list. ¶

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sitting in your kitchen, Colin was still a toddler, and your first book was only half done. At the time, British royalties weren't very high on your list of things to worry about."

Surprisingly, Sara laughed. Threw her head back and guffawed like a trucker, startling the baby awake. "It's okay, honey," she cooed, rocking the infant. "Mommy's just flipping out. Get used to it."

"Feel better?" CeeJay asked.

"Definitely." Sara nodded. "I needed that. You always could make me laugh, CeeJay, even when we were kids. So tell me, honestly, am I turning into a neurotic jerk?"

"Hell no. You're dealing with a new career, two kids, and a divorce. I'd be worried if you weren't a little freaked out."

"Okay, granted, I'm feeling stressed. Should I just ignore this business with Colin and his little telephone to forever?"

CeeJay almost said yes. But didn't. If she'd learned anything in her years as a therapist, it was to listen to her patients.

Really listen.

Except for the occasional hypochondriac, most patients try to minimize their problems, hoping they'll go away. Sara Klein was a bright, competent woman who adored her kids. If she was sincerely concerned about her son . . .

"Does Colin ever hear voices away from the phone? Imaginary conversations, that sort of thing?"

"No. That red plastic phone has always been one of his favorite toys. He was babbling on it even before he could talk. But as far as actual conversations, he only talks to my dad. Or says he does," she amended.

"And does your dad ever tell him to do things?"

"Sometimes," Sara conceded. "Most of them are harmless, like 'Grandpa says it's okay if I have a cookie.' The usual kid stuff."

"But that's not what worries you, is it?"

"No. There's more. Colin shows serious flashes of temper sometimes. He inherited Don's temper, I'm afraid. He gets red-faced, smashes his toys."

"Has he ever tried to hurt himself? Banging his head, say, or biting himself? Throwing himself down the stairs?"

"No, nothing self-destructive, but . . . last week he said we should take some cookies to the people next door. Because something bad happened to their cat."

"And had something happened to it?"

"It was dead. They found it in the backyard. It could have been struck by a car and crawled home. But it . . . could have been beaten to death, too. The injuries were pretty awful. When I asked Colin how he knew about it, he said his grandfather told him it died."

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"Do you think he might have injured it? Has he ever been violent with the cat or other animals?"

"No. That is, I don't think so," Sara said miserably. "Technically, I'm a stay-at-home mom, but the reality is that I'm typing away in my office while the nanny watches Colin and the baby. I know Maria lets Colin play alone in the backyard sometimes. Maybe she didn't see what happened or was afraid to tell me and—"

"—Or maybe Colin saw a dead cat, it upset him, and he filtered the news through his imaginary pal."

"Do you think that's what happened?"

"No way to be certain, of course, but it seems a lot more likely than your scenario," CeeJay said. "Stop beating yourself up for not being Superwoman, Sara. You spend more quality time with your kids than most working moms, and Maria seems competent. Do you want my professional opinion? Straight up?"

"Straight up." Sara nodded, swallowing.

"Okay. The behavior you've described, a boy chatting with an imaginary grandfather, is well within behavioral norms for a child his age, especially during a divorce. My professional advice? Relax, he'll grow out of it. Or you will."

"Me?"

"You're under a lot of stress, kiddo. I'm more concerned about you than Colin. But then I've known you longer."

"Don't worry about me," Sara said firmly. "But I'd like to be absolutely certain Colin's all right. Is there anything more you can do?"

"If you still have some concerns, I'd be happy to see him at the office, run a few tests—"

"Donald would never agree. He thinks I'm being paranoid and he's always resented our friendship anyway."

"Then I'm afraid there's nothing I can do. With joint custody, both parents have to agree to counseling."

"Suppose we keep it unofficial? You could just come up to the cottage this weekend, hang out at the lake, spend a little time with Colin, see what you think."

"I really can't," CeeJay said automatically. "I have to . . ."

"Have to what?" Sara prompted. "What's more important than spending a weekend at the beach with an old friend?"

CeeJay hesitated. She had a bad feeling about this. Very bad. And yet Sara was her oldest friend. And she was asking for help. She shrugged, giving in. "Okay, I'll come. You'll have to tell Don about it, though."

"I'll put an ad in the paper, if you like. It'll be great, CeeJay! We can relive our childhoods, figure out where we went wrong. Tommy's coming up, too. It'll be like old times."

"What's your little brother doing these days?"

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"Tommy's managing an appliance store in Midland. Bassey's, the big discount place. And he's still single," she added slyly.

"Down, girl. I'm not in the market."

"Glad to hear it. We can be old maids together. You're sure you can make it this weekend?"

"Sure," CeeJay said. "It'll be fun."

"Brrring, brrring," Colin sputtered, spinning the dial on his toy telephone. "Hi, Grandpa. How are ya?"

"Are you out of your everlovin' mind, Dr. McKenzie?" Mavis Dellums asked pleasantly. "Or have you just forgotten the Hippocratic oath?"

"Which part?"

"The part that says any therapist who treats a friend's kid must be a nut case herself."

"Oh, that part." CeeJay nodded, sipping her coffee. They were in Mavis's office between therapy sessions. Tiled walls, tiled floors, gunmetal-gray furniture. Institutional chic.

A matronly African-American grandmother, Mavis Dellums was CeeJay's boss and her friend. She rarely raised her voice, but the multi-million-dollar public health clinic she managed hummed along like a Swiss watch.

"Anyway, I'm not treating Sara's son," CeeJay countered. "Not exactly, anyway."

"Then what are you doing? Exactly." Mavis was knitting a colorful scarf, one of the fifty or so she gave away each year.

"Being a friend. Sara and I have been pals since we were kids. Our folks had cottages near each other on Fire Lake. Hanging out all summer, swimming every day, wiener roasts . . ." CeeJay's voice trailed away.

"What is it?"

"Just thinking. It's all gone now. My parents split up. Her mom was killed in an auto accident when we were in high school and her dad died last year. I haven't been to the lake in . . . wow. More years than I care to remember."

"Then it'll be fun seeing it again, right?"

"Sure. I guess."

"You don't sound very enthusiastic."

"It's been a very long time, that's all."

"Tell me about the boy," Mavis prompted.

"Nice kid. Bright, polite. Looks like a little blond bowling ball with legs, but he moves twice as fast."

"You mentioned that Sara's in the middle of a divorce. Could the split be triggering the boy's conversations with his grandfather?"

"Talking to Gramps to get attention from Mom?" CeeJay mused. "Possibly, but I didn't get any sense of that. No sidelong glances when he was talking on the phone, no needling. Nothing obvious."

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"Probably unconnected then. Four-year-olds aren't subtle."

"Sara says Colin doesn't always talk. Sometimes he just listens."

"To his dead grandfather? On a toy telephone?" Mavis glanced up over her bifocals. "Has Gramps offered him any hot stock tips?"

"I'm serious."

"So am I, hon. You're either talking about a disturbed child or life after death. What could be more serious than that?" Mavis resumed her knitting. Without missing a stitch.

That night, CeeJay had the old dream. The dream of her grandfather.

She'd felt uneasy all day. As though she'd forgotten an important appointment. Or as if some awful thing was hovering in the shadows of her memory just out of sight. Waiting to pounce.

She saw patients, consulted with colleagues, smiled, chatted, cheered people up, updated charts. And the day crawled past as if she were walking underwater.

She felt haunted. And not by a boy talking to his dead grandfather on a toy telephone.

A forgotten fear was gathering around her like rising fog. Fear she'd carried for half her childhood. A fear she didn't recognize. Until that night.

She went to bed early, scanned a few case files for her new domestic-violence group. Must have fallen asleep.

And sometime during the night, she felt pressure on the foot of her bed. And knew he was there. He'd come back.

She kept her eyes squeezed tightly shut. Hiding. Hoping he'd go away. Knowing he wouldn't.

But she wasn't a scared kid anymore. She was a grown woman with a life and a responsible job. She had to face this.

And so she opened her eyes. And he was there. Her grandfather.

Sitting on the edge of the bed in his faded overalls and work shirt. Knuckles gnarled and scarred. Wispy white hair askew.

"Help me, Cathy," he pleaded. "I can't find Lobo. He's lost. And I am, too. I'm so cold. Help me."

"I'm sorry, Grandfather. I didn't mean it."

"Being sorry doesn't help. It makes it worse. See how cold I am?" He held out his hand and she touched it. His skin was dry and papery and deathly cold. And his eyes were changing, blazing up like coals—

She snapped awake. Gasping. Yanking her hand away from the icy—plastic folder. One of the case files scattered around the bed. A dream. Nothing more. She was safe in her own home, in her own bed. Yet she couldn't shake the fear. The power of the dream.

"I'm sorry, Grandfather," she said again. To the empty room. "I'm so sorry."

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She slept fitfully the rest of the night. Awoke haggard and raggedy. Skipped breakfast. Drove in to the clinic early, hoping the workaday utility of her office would banish the dream's shadows from the corners of her mind. But it was a bad day at the clinic. Surly patients. Blue Cross kicked back a pile of paperwork because they'd changed the regulations without telling anybody, which meant delayed payments and . . .

No. The truth was, it wasn't really a bad day. It was hectic, stressful, and exasperating. A normal day in a public health clinic. Average.

Ordinarily, CeeJay loved her work. Mental health lite. Helping people to cope with the stress in their lives, dealing with their demons, saving the human race one patient at a time.

But today she felt like one of the casualties. A stumbling soul in need of help. But she didn't get it. She got trouble instead.

At her desk between sessions, she was sipping scalding coffee, struggling to translate a new Medicaid directive from bureaucratese into English, when her intercom buzzed.

"Gentleman to see you, Doctor," Annie, the clinic secretary said. "No appointment. A Mr. Donald Klein?"

Sara's soon-to-be-ex husband. Terrific. This day was going down the tubes in a hurry. "Send him in."

Don Klein stormed in like the halfback he'd been in college, slamming the door behind him. He'd put on a few pounds, a hefty bulge at his waistline, a double chin. Still looked presentable, though. A campus Adonis fading fast.

"Don, nice to see you—"

"Skip the crap, CeeJay. We never liked each other and there's no reason to pretend now. You're lucky I haven't sued your ass off."

"Sued me? For what?"

"Alienation of affections, conflict of interest, malpractice—"

"Slow down a little, Don, you've lost me. What on earth are you talking about?"

"You can't deny you've been interfering in my marriage!"

"In what way?"

"Giving Sara your psychobabble advice. We were doing fine until she started talking to you behind my back."

"Behind your back? Don, Sara and I have been friends since we were kids. She doesn't need your permission to talk to me or anyone else."

"And what did you two talk about? That she's a big-shot author now, so screw her family obligations? Forget that old Don might like a home-cooked meal once in a while and maybe a clean shirt to wear to work. Maybe she's making more money than I am now,

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but so what? For a helluva long time, she was just another mouse-wife. I carried the load."

"Sara always worked," CeeJay pointed out quietly, trying to keep the edge out of her tone.

"You call those piddly-ass little secretarial jobs work? She barely earned minimum wage."

"With a baby at home and one on the way, and trying to write novels, what was she supposed to do? Get a job as a lumberjack? When she wasn't cooking your meals and doing your laundry, I mean."

"Don't get snotty with me, bitch!"

"Whoa! That's enough! I take static every day, but I get paid for it. You're not a client and neither is Sara. She's my friend. And if you want some friendly advice, try kicking the booze, Don. Get into a program. It's not even noon and you're already half in the bag."

"The hell I am!"

"Please. I can smell the scotch from here."

"Okay, maybe I've had one or two. The way my life's going, I'm entitled. And I'm warning you, CeeJay. You stay away from Sara from now on. And stay away from my boy! Or I'll make you sorry!"

"Really? And how will you do that? By slapping me around? The way you did Sara?"

"Don't think it can't happen. You're sure as hell asking for it. You can only push a man so far."

"I'm not pushing you at all, Don. But if you feel lucky, go ahead, take your best shot."

"What?"

"Do it! Take a swing at me. Only I'm not Sara, pal. I deal with domestic-violence cases every day. You're not the first jerk who's threatened me in this office. You're not even the tenth."

"You'll just call security and have me arrested."

"I won't have to. A few years back I got roughed up by a client's husband. He was a lot bigger than you and wired on amphetamines. I couldn't handle him. Know what I did about it?"

"What?"

"I got a stun gun, Don, a Taser. Industrial strength. Guaranteed to dump a buffalo on its butt. I carry it all the time." She patted the pocket of her smock.

"Bull. You don't have any gun."

"Maybe not. But you don't want to find out, do you? You'd rather beat on women half your size. Like the mother of your children."

"You're crazier than your patients."

"If I am, I'm in the right place. We help crazy people here. Sometimes we even help violent people. But unless you get serious about wanting help, don't come back here, Don. If you ever threaten Sara or me again, I really will have you arrested. Or I'll put you in the hospital. Now if you don't mind, I have patients waiting."

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He hesitated, red-faced. Furious. Then he whirled and strode out, stopping in the doorway.

"Remember what I told you, CeeJay. Stay away from my family or you'll be sorry you ever met me."

"I'm sorry already. Close the door behind you, please."

He slammed it shut. Again. A moment later there was a gentle rap and Mavis stuck her head in.

"Are you okay? Annie said she heard shouting."

"Just another unhappy customer. Nobody to worry about."

"I'm more worried about you. You look like hell."

"Thanks for sharing that."

"I just meant you look like you haven't been sleeping," Mavis said, stepping in and easing her bulk into the chair facing CeeJay's desk.

"And I thought the rumors about you being a witch were just gossip."

"I'm serious, CeeJay. What's up with you? If it's this business with your friend's son, you'd better drop it. Treating a friend is always a lousy idea."

"Funny, that's what her husband just said. I told him to take a hike."

"You can't throw me out, I run the joint. Maybe you should tell me what's really bothering you instead. Is it the boy? Or something else?"

"Both." CeeJay sighed. "I'm not really worried about Colin, but it's . . . getting complicated."

"Then let's straighten it out. That's what we do here."

"But I have patients—"

"We'll reschedule if we have to. Let's have it, CeeJay. What's going on?"

"I guess I have a problem," CeeJay admitted. "And I'm warning you up front, it's not pretty."

"Gee, that'll be a first. What is it?"

"I killed my grandfather," CeeJay said quietly.

"Killed him?"

"Caused his death, I mean."

"How? What happened?"

"My folks had a cottage at Fire Lake. We spent our summers there, my dad would commute up on weekends. Sara and I and all the neighborhood kids swam every day and hung out on the beach. It was a . . . wonderful time."

Mavis said nothing. Waiting.

"The summer I was . . . nine, I guess, my grandfather showed up in his old car. My dad's father. He was a farmer, wore overalls, shaved about once a week. He'd never visited us there before, but his wife died earlier that year. He was probably lonely."

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"Sounds reasonable."

"The thing was, he brought his dog along, a big black dog, a chow, I think. Looked like a bear and it was pretty aggressive. Barked at me, barked at the other kids. Never bit anyone, but it scared the hell out of us. And to be honest, my grandfather scared us, too."

"In what way?"

"He was grouchy, yelled at us to be quiet when he was reading. He'd sit in the front yard in a lawn chair with that damned black dog at his feet . . ." CeeJay broke off, remembering.

"Before long, I was the neighborhood leper. My little pals were afraid to come over, and when I went to the beach they teased me about my grandfather. 'Cathy's crazy grandpa and his crazy dog.' Just kid stuff. But when you're nine . . ."

"Everything seems so important." Mavis nodded.

"Exactly. Sara was the only one who stood by me, but her folks wouldn't let her play at my house anymore because of Grandpa's dog."

"It must have been upsetting," Mavis prompted.

"It was no big deal, I know that now. But at the time I thought he was ruining my life. And not just mine. I could hear my mom and dad arguing about him in their room. We didn't have much space, so Grandpa slept out on the sun-porch sofa. He kept Lobo, that was the dog's name, tied up outside at night." CeeJay took a deep breath.

"Before he came, I used to sneak out of my room sometimes, after my parents were asleep. Sara and I would meet on the beach, watch the moon, share little-girl secrets. We'd stopped meeting because I was afraid of the dog. But one night I decided to try to sneak past him. It didn't work. Lobo spotted me but . . . he didn't bark. He just wagged his tail." CeeJay swallowed.

"So I went up to him. My heart was pounding, I was scared to death . . . and he kept wagging his stupid tail harder, licking my hand. Glad to see somebody. And I untied him. I turned him loose," she finished in a rush. "He took off like a shot. Ran away into the woods. And I was glad he did, only . . ."

"He didn't come back?" Mavis prompted.

"No. We looked for the dog everywhere, but we never found him. My grandfather was heartbroken. Eventually Grandpa went back to his farm alone. My folks divorced the next year, partly over the trouble with my grandfather, I think. A few years later my dad had to put Grandpa in a home. Alzheimer's. I visited him there a few times, but . . . He didn't know me, Mavis. And all he ever talked about was his lost dog."

"Did I miss something? I thought you said you caused his death."

"My sophomore year in college, my grandfather snuck out of his

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room at the rest home. Walked out into a blizzard. They found him the next day. Too late."

"My, my, that's a sad story," Mavis conceded. "It truly is. But let me be sure I understand it. You think all this grief, your grandfather's death, your parents' divorce, was all your fault? Because you untied a dog?"

"I think my grandfather went into that storm looking for Lobo," CeeJay said carefully. "After his funeral I changed my major from economics to psychology. Out of guilt. And here we are. Not a very pretty story, is it?"

"I've heard worse," Mavis said. "So have you. You're a trained therapist now, Dr. McKenzie, and we all studied juvenile omnipotent guilt in college. Kids think the world revolves around them so they assume everything that goes wrong is their fault. They're kids, they don't know any better.

"You, on the other hand, know damned well that untying a dog didn't wreck your parents' marriage or kill an Alzheimer's patient. You need to work through this."

"I thought I got past it years ago. This business with Sara's son seems to have brought it all back. I used to have a recurring dream about my grandfather. I had it again last night."

"Perfectly natural under the circumstances. Which is another reason to stay away from your friend's case. You're too close to maintain professional objectivity. And you're carrying baggage of your own."

"I know, Mavis, when you're right, you're right. And you always are."

"Except when I'm not," Mavis countered. "The truth is, I may not be totally objective about this case, either. Something you said yesterday really bothered me. The part about the boy listening to his late grandfather on the phone?"

"What about it?"

"It seemed familiar. I didn't remember why until later, and now I'm not sure I should tell you at all."

"After saying that much, you'll have to tell me, Mavis. If you expect to leave this room alive."

"Gee, since you ask so politely, how much do you know about hospices?"

"Hospices?" CeeJay echoed, surprised. "They're rest homes where terminal patients go to die, right? What about them?"

"I worked in a hospice my senior year at Michigan State. Easy gig, flexible hours, nice people. Hospice patients know they're dying, and most of them handle it with incredible grace. It's easier for them than for the staff, sometimes."

"What's that got to do with Colin's case?"

"I'm coming to that. The thing is, as hospice patients near the

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end, a lot of them start talking to the dead. They have long, involved conversations with people who . . . aren't there."

"Hallucinating, you mean."

"No, not at all. They aren't hysterical or confused. They don't talk to Jesus or Napoleon or Clark Kent. They talk to dead relatives, husbands, wives. Or grandfathers. Like Colin."

"Colin's not a hospice patient. He's four years old and healthy as a horse."

"I know. What you said about him listening made me remember the hospice. Sometimes patients would do that. Listen. You'd think they were zoned out, in a trance. And then they'd comment on something the other person just said. It was like being with someone who's talking on a telephone. You can only hear one end of the conversation."

"Sara calls it a telephone to forever. But you don't think anyone's really on the other end of the line, do you?"

"I'm not sure." Mavis shrugged. "Look, this may sound like an old wives' tale, which is okay since I'm an old wife. But I'm also a practical woman with a Ph.D. One night I was working a mid shift. A lady on my ward had been talking to her dead husband for hours. Chatting away, happy as a clam. I wasn't paying much attention. Then suddenly she, um . . ." Mavis swallowed.

"What happened?" CeeJay asked.

"She turned to me and told me to call home. Her husband—her *late* husband—said there was trouble at my house."

"What kind of trouble?"

"A fire," Mavis said simply. "It didn't make any sense, but the woman seemed so sure. . . . Anyway, against my better judgment, I called. And a fireman answered. There'd been a fire in the apartment across the hall. They'd evacuated the building. My kids were okay, but . . ." She shivered.

CeeJay stared. "Mavis, you're scaring the hell out of me. Please tell me you're putting me on."

"Sorry. We joke around a lot, Dr. McKenzie, but I'm not kidding about this. I'm not saying I believe in spooks or UFOs. I'm just telling you what happened."

"That a ghost warned you about a fire?"

"Not a ghost, a patient. Maybe she was psychic. Maybe her dentures picked up police broadcasts or it was just a wild coincidence. Or maybe, just *maybe,* it was exactly what she said it was. Her late husband gave her a heads-up from the other side and she passed it along to me. Does this mean Colin has a telephone to forever that connects to his grandfather? Of course not. But it's another reason you should let this case go."

"That's what the last guy said. Threatened to beat me about the head and shoulders if I didn't."

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"It was excellent advice. Which is why I'm sure you won't take it."

"Sara's my friend and she's asked for help, Mavis. And as for my grandfather, maybe it's time I face up to what I did and try to put the past behind me."

"It's already there, hon." Mavis sighed, rising to leave. "That's the trouble with the past. It's always right behind you. You may forget it sometimes, but it never goes away. Ever. Have a nice weekend, now, you hear? And say 'hi' to your grandpa for me."

Driving north in Michigan is like time travel. The factory towns—Detroit, Flint, and Lansing—are in constant chaos, building, razing, building again. Sprawling over their limits.

A hundred miles north, the pace slows down by twenty years. At first glance, CeeJay thought Fire Lake had been asleep since her childhood, untouched by time. Dreaming, like Brigadoon.

Slowing her blue Volvo to cross the rickety Erector Set suspension bridge over Miles Creek, she felt a lump rising in her throat.

Nothing has changed. Only me. I'm twenty-something years older. And not a bit wiser.

The village was smaller than she remembered, a two-block business district, Glen's Supermart at one end, a Sunoco station at the other. But as she drove through, she realized a few things *were* different.

A new multiplex theater stood on one corner. Three screens. What had been there before? A drugstore. Pickett's Drugstore. The one with the soda fountain. Vanilla and cherry Cokes mixed at the counter. Served in sweating glass tumblers. Incredibly delicious.

And racks of comic books. Hoarding their change to buy a new *Archie* or . . . she couldn't remember them all. But she recalled Sara, nine years old, skinny and sunburned, her hair in pigtails. Solemnly weighing her options, taking forever to decide which comic to buy. For a quarter.

And now Sara's own books were in drugstores. And in bookshops and airports all over the country. And the Brits were stalling on her royalty payments. Wow. How did so much time flash by?

The old Woolworth store had been subdivided into artsy little antique shops. Tacky sculptures and Native American relics. Pricey. Plastic. But overall, the village looked sharp. New storefronts trimmed with Victorian gingerbread. A tad touristy, perhaps, but nice.

It was outside the village that the real changes began. CeeJay remembered the Fire Lake shore as an infinite vista of sandy beaches, blue water, and whitecaps. Perhaps it still was. She couldn't tell.

New homes, squatting on every usable inch of beachfront, blocked out the shoreline completely. Not summer cottages. Subur-

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ban ranches with two-car garages and postage-stamp lawns. As alike as animal crackers.

Some homes attempted a faux rustic look, log siding or phony fieldstone, but most could have been plucked from any UMC subdivision in Detroit and dumped on the shore. Northern retreats for city folks desperate to get away from it all. And bringing it all with them.

The sprawl continued for several miles outside the village before it began to thin and CeeJay could glimpse bits of the beach—between real estate signs.

But as she turned onto the Point Road that led to Sara's summer home and her parents' old place, her heartbeat picked up.

Excitement and anxiety in equal parts. What would the cottage look like now? What memories would it hold?

None, actually. She slowed her Volvo as she passed her folks' driveway, but there was nothing to see. Lilacs and sumac shrubs had grown over the lane, obscuring the view. She couldn't see the cottage at all.

Just as well. She wasn't sure she was ready to.

A half-mile down the road, Sara's summer home was a welcome relief. The sprawling two-story Gothic clapboard monstrosity sat facing a private cove, sheltered from the wind and its neighbors by century-old pines.

As CeeJay pulled into the backyard, Colin came tearing around the corner of the house grinning like an imp, a barefoot tornado in red beach bibs.

"Moooom! Mom! Docker McKenzie's here!"

Scooping up Colin, CeeJay carried the squirming bundle of energy around to the front of the house. And stopped.

Fire Lake. She'd forgotten how lovely it was from the end of the point. Choppy waters stretching almost to the horizon. A pair of catamarans racing in the distance, white sails pure as poetry against the pine-covered hills of the far shore.

She found Sara and the baby on the veranda that stretched the length of the house facing the lake.

"Wow," CeeJay breathed, lowering Colin to the ground. "My memory just got a major jolt. I'd forgotten how spectacular the view was out here."

"It's on my list of top ten vistas," Sara agreed, sounding more relaxed than she had in weeks. "Colin? Stay in the shallow water, honey." Her son was already charging along the shore in ankle-deep water, splashing with such devilish glee that Sara and CeeJay both laughed aloud.

"Hey, if it isn't that skinny brat from down the beach," Tommy Sanders said. "Keeps popping up like a bad penny every twenty years. How are you, CeeJay? Or should I call you Dr. McKenzie

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now?" Tommy parked the tea tray he'd carried out to the deck and gave CeeJay a quick hug.

"The brat from down the beach will do."

"Deal." Tommy grinned. "Want some lemonade? Fresh out of the can. Or maybe something stronger? I've got that, too. A martini? Or are you the wine-cooler type?"

"It's a little early for me," CeeJay said. It obviously wasn't for Tommy. His eyes were vague and he'd clearly had a taste or two already. Well, why not? It was a getaway weekend, after all.

Tommy'd grown into a strikingly handsome man. Tall, blond, and deeply tanned, he looked like a surfer. Dressed like one, too, in gym shorts, a torn T-shirt, and Weejuns. Junior-high gigolo, CeeJay thought, remembering her nickname for him.

Two years younger than Sara, Tommy had always been off-limits to CeeJay as boyfriend material. Little Brother syndrome. Okay to hang out with, to tease, or to punch. But not to date. In grade school, age differences are measured in dog years.

They'd seen each other a few times since, at Sara's graduation and Colin's christening . . . four years before? Maybe her vision was failing. Tommy looked a lot better than she remembered.

"Lemonade, Colin!" Tommy yelled. "Come and get it!"

"Come and get *me!*" Colin yelled back, taking off down the beach. Tommy followed with a whoop, splashing after his nephew through the shallow surf.

"Guys," Sara snorted. "They get taller and go gray but they never grow up."

"It's called boyish charm," CeeJay said, easing onto a lounge chair beside Sara's. "Tommy looks good."

"He looks a bit frazzled to me. Working too hard. I guess the appliance business is pretty cutthroat."

"I thought his degree was in computer science."

"It is, but his first few jobs were with dot-com companies that crashed and he had to scuffle for work. He's doing better now. New Corvette, new clothes. Good thing. I may need a loan."

"Why? I thought bestselling authors were loaded."

"Not the ones in the middle of a nasty divorce. My dad's final illness ate up all of his savings and most of mine. In the end, his estate barely covered what it cost to bury him. All he left us was this place, and even that's a mixed blessing."

"How so?"

"Taxes are killing us. Land values have skyrocketed around here lately. We've talked about selling, but I really don't want to."

"It's a beautiful old place."

"Old is the operative word. The roof leaks, the plumbing's falling apart. It needs major remodeling, which I certainly can't afford right now, nor can Tommy. Maybe he's right, maybe we should dump it."

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"Would that be so terrible?"

"It would to me. I know keeping this place doesn't make financial sense, CeeJay, but I've lost so much lately: my dad, my marriage. I feel like my life's flying apart. I don't want to lose anything else. Does that sound crazy?"

"Absolutely. Sorry, but you've completely flipped out. You'll have to be committed."

"Thanks so much," Sara said, grinning in spite of herself.

"No charge. Besides, you've gained a few things, too. Like your freedom, and that little dreamboat in your arms, and Colin, and a new career. Things could be worse, right?"

"I know. I count my blessings every single night. And your friendship is one of them. Especially since I may need your professional expertise to stay out of the booby hatch."

"Lighten up, Sara. You're going through a tough time, but everyone does. Well, maybe not everyone. The boys seem to be doing just fine." On the beach, Tommy and Colin were gleefully building sandcastles, then knocking them down with equal gusto.

"I've got a great idea," Sara said slyly. "Why don't you marry Tommy? You can keep me sane, straighten Colin out, and we'll all live happily ever after here at the lake."

"Works for me," CeeJay said breezily. And she was only half kidding. The idea of repeating her childhood had some appeal. Maybe she could get it right this time. And Tommy Sanders as a love interest? A girl could do worse.

They whiled away the afternoon, playing, swimming, reminiscing. Tommy played the perfect host, making drinks and conversation with equal ease.

At one point he volunteered to smear sunblock lotion on CeeJay's back. Took his time doing it. But didn't overstep. Sara noticed, of course, but held her tongue. A rare thing.

Around three, Sara put the kids down for a nap and nodded off herself. Tommy and CeeJay spread a blanket on the beach away from the house to avoid disturbing her.

They didn't. After five minutes of murmured small talk, Tommy dozed off in mid sentence, worn out from playing with Colin. And perhaps one beer too many.

CeeJay rose quietly, gazing down at him. Asleep, Tommy looked even younger. And even more handsome. Odd. She'd never thought of Tommy as anything but Sara's little brother. He was already part of her past. Now she wondered if he'd be part of her future.

Whoa, slow down, girl. Better settle the past's unfinished business before thinking about the future.

Pulling on a sweatshirt and her tennis shoes, she set off down the beach toward her parents' old cottage. And its ghosts.

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Over the years underbrush had crept out toward the waterline, making the walk longer and more difficult than she remembered. Or maybe her legs were just twenty years older.

Even so, as she neared the cottage she felt her heart begin to lift as a thousand golden childhood memories overshadowed the pain of that last summer.

Her pace picked up on its own, first to a trot, then a lope, and then she found herself running. Pounding down the beach like a nine-year-old, fighting the crazy urge to shout, "Mom, I'm home!"

But she wasn't home. Cresting the last dune, CeeJay thought she'd misjudged the distance. Somehow she'd lost her way, gone to the wrong spot. Because it wasn't there. The old stone sea wall that shielded the site from the waves and winter ice proved she was in the right place. But there was no cottage. Only a wild tangle of lilacs, sumac, and briar bushes.

Baffled, she scrambled atop the sea wall. There. From above, she could discern the outline of the cottage's foundation. And what had happened to it.

Fire. Quite some time ago, apparently. Nothing remained of the house but a few blackened timbers protruding from the sand like skeletal arms clawing out of a grave. Weeds grew wild in the ruins where the rooms had been.

Kneeling slowly on the sea wall, CeeJay gazed at the wreckage of the happiest times of her life. And the source of the terrible memories that haunted her still.

It must have been quite a fire. The old cottage was just a crackerbox, really. Weathered clapboard siding. Knotty-pine interior. Probably went up like a matchbook.

There. That was the corner where her bedroom had been. Just down the hall from her parents' room. For a moment she could almost hear them arguing in hissing, bitter whispers. But it was only the breeze rustling the underbrush.

The wind off the lake seemed to be rising, thrusting thunderclouds as big as galleons inland. Blocking out the sun, darkening the dying afternoon.

A rainstorm? Looked like it. She couldn't recall a warning, but lake-effect weather is notoriously unstable and she could feel the temperature dropping as though nature had just opened the refrigerator door.

Time to go. There was nothing for her here. And the bugs were beginning to find her. Mosquitoes and deer flies homing in. Hungry for blood.

Stifling a sigh, she rose to leave—and caught a whiff of something on the wind. Smoke. But not from these ruins. Woodsmoke. Fresh. And scented with a hint of campfire coffee.

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Frowning, she tried to recall the lay of the land farther along the shore—

She froze. Something was wrong. Dangerously wrong. She didn't know what, but years of working with violent patients had honed her survival instincts to a razor edge.

She wasn't alone. Someone was watching.

Trying to appear casual, she glanced back for a last look at the ruins, hastily scanning the brush for—there. Almost missed them.

Eyes. Glaring at her from the shadows. Across the clearing a dark shape rose slowly from the forest floor. An animal. Crouched, ready to charge. She couldn't see it very clearly. . . .

Yet it seemed terribly familiar.

"Lobo?" she whispered, unwilling to believe her own eyes. It couldn't be. "Lobo?"

At the sound of her voice, the shape whirled and was gone. Vanished like smoke on the wind. Only a trembling branch proved he'd been there at all.

And suddenly CeeJay was running, sprinting across the clearing, vaulting over the old foundation, skeletal fingers clawing her legs as she plunged into the brush after the dog.

"Lobo! Come back! Dammit Lo—!" Something grabbed her ankle, pulling her down. She banged off some wreckage, landing hard.

Stunned, panting, she stayed still a moment, gasping for breath, gathering her wits. Trying to make sense of what she'd seen.

It couldn't have been Lobo. My God, her grandfather's dog disappeared more than twenty years ago. In dog years he'd be . . . Dead. No question about it. As dead as her grandfather.

And yet she'd seen him.

No. She'd seen something. Eyes. A dark shape moving. Hadn't seen it clearly. Couldn't even be sure it *was* a dog. Lobo and her grandfather had been on her mind, so when she saw the shadow move . . .

Maybe that's all it was. A shadow. Perhaps nothing had been there at all.

Shaking her head at her own foolishness, CeeJay pulled her ankle free of the grapevine she'd stumbled over and rose painfully to her feet.

Ouch. Bruised and scraped and grimy with soot from the ruins. A real mess.

She was dusting herself off as best she could when the sky grumbled and then opened. Rain. A chilly, depressing drizzle.

Terrific. The end of a perfect day.

After clambering cautiously over the sea wall, CeeJay limped off down the beach toward Sara's cottage. Hugging herself against the chill. Not hurrying this time.

She had nowhere to run anymore.

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Dinner was cold. A summer salad, shrimp on ice, tuna sandwiches. CeeJay felt equally cold. Chilled to the bone by the rain and the ruin of her childhood cottage.

And even more shaken by her glimpse of Lobo. Or whatever the hell it was.

She told the story over dinner, of course, playing it for laughs, making light of her loss while the rain drummed on the roof and thunder rumbled over the angry surf.

But no one smiled.

"You must have been terrified," Sara said, shivering as she rocked the baby.

"It was only a dog," CeeJay said. "And the truth is, I'm not sure I saw anything at all."

"You must have," Tommy said positively.

"Why do you say that? Have you seen it?"

"Nope, I haven't been down that way in years. Didn't know the cottage had burned. But you were never much of a storyteller, CeeJay, you couldn't fake a fib if your life depended on it, ergo, you must have seen something. Why don't we walk over in the morning to check things out? I've never even met a ghost-ghost, let alone a ghost dog. Might be fun."

"It didn't really seem funny to me."

"You always did take things too seriously." Tommy smiled, punching her lightly on the shoulder. "It's part of your charm."

"Unlike some people I could mention," Sara countered.

"Hey, I occasionally take some things seriously, Sis, but ghosts? Get real. My love life's scarier than that. Tell you what, why don't we have brandy in front of the fireplace, swap ghost stories, and scare the pants off each other?"

"Brrring, brrring," Colin sputtered, picking up his toy telephone. "Hi, Grandpa. Whatcha doin'?"

"And speaking of ghosts," Tommy said, shaking his head.

"Colin, put down the phone," Sara ordered.

"But Mom, I'm talking to Grandpa—"

"I said, put it down!"

"No need to yell at the boy," Tommy said. "He's only playing."

"I don't happen to like the way he's playing! And I'll thank you not to interfere."

"Interfere? Sis, you're ruining the boy's weekend just because—whoa! Know what? I think I'll call it a night," Tommy said, rising. "The last thing we need is another hassle, especially when we've got company. I'm glad you came, CeeJay. I had fun today. And tomorrow we'll head down the beach to play ghostbusters, right?"

"Sure, if you like."

"Terrific. And by the way, I'm glad you're not the bossy brat from down the shore anymore."

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"Thank you, kind sir. Or is there a punch line to that?"

"No punch line. Oops, did I say something nice? I must be slipping. Should I pull your pigtails to make up for it?"

"Try it and you'll be picking up your teeth with your broken arm," CeeJay snorted.

"In that case, it's definitely past my bedtime. 'Night, all."

After Tommy trotted up the stairs, CeeJay noticed Sara staring at her. "What?"

"Just wondering. Is something going on with you two?"

"Don't be silly. We haven't seen each other in years, that's all."

"Mom, Grandpa says—"

"Damn it, Colin!" Sara snapped, slapping the plastic phone out of his hand. His face deflated like a party balloon. "Oh, honey, I'm sorry. Mommy didn't mean it, she's just tired. . . . Oh, Colin, please don't cry."

Too late. Sweeping her sobbing son up in her arms, Sara carried him off to bed. Leaving CeeJay alone in the uneasy silence. Which was appropriate. The last summer she'd spent here hadn't been very happy, either.

Alone in her room, CeeJay opened the window to the rainy night. She'd always loved the lake-country gales, loved their sudden violence and passion. But tonight her low spirits sapped the storm of its grandeur. The wind gusts felt ominous, unfriendly. Leaving her bedside lamp on for comfort, she crawled under the sheets, exhausted, but too wired to sleep. Lightning flashing in the distance set shadows dancing in the corners of her room.

A small room, really. Funny, as a kid she'd thought Sara's parents were rich, that this summer home was a castle compared to her little cottage.

It wasn't. The sprawling old place was a virtual rabbit warren. A dozen tiny guest rooms, built in the 'twenties, when having extra space for family and friends was more important than creature comforts like central heat or second bathrooms. Sara was right, the place wasn't very practical anymore.

But at least it was still standing. Her childhood cottage was gone. Burned to the ground. Years ago, from the looks of it.

And yet Lobo was still there. She'd seen him. No. She couldn't have. It simply wasn't possible.

With the storm rumbling outside, she tried to focus on the figure she'd seen in the ruins. Couldn't do it. Eyes. A moving shadow. Like something out of a dream. Or a nightmare. She shivered, thinking she'd never fall asleep.

But as she was drifting off she remembered Colin's sudden phone call from his grandfather. When everyone was ignoring him. Was that call a bit too convenient? Could he be using the phone to draw attention to himself? She'd have to watch. . . .

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She sat up in the darkness, groggy, only half-awake. Her parents had been arguing . . . no. Couldn't have been. It was only a dream.

She was in Sara's summer cottage. In a guest room. In the dark.

But she'd left her bedside lamp on. She tried the switch. Nothing. Okay, the power had failed. Storm must have knocked a line down. No big deal.

And yet she was trembling. Dry-mouthed. Fearful. Why? What had frightened her? Wakened her?

The storm? No. The thunder was only a distant rumbling now and the drizzle was fading into a soothing whisper. Perfect weather for sleeping.

And yet her stomach was still knotted with fear. Had a dream wakened her? Yes. It was coming back now. She'd been dreaming of her parents arguing. About her grandfather . . . Footsteps were coming down the hall. She swallowed. Was her grandfather coming back?

No! Don't be stupid. It was probably Sara. Coming for a late-night chat.

Or perhaps Tommy? How should she react? Shoo him away? Or invite him to stay. Just to talk, of course. . . . The footsteps passed by. Giving her a quick pang of disappointment.

Smiling at her own foolishness, CeeJay plopped back on her pillow, thinking about Tommy. He'd grown up into an interesting, attractive guy. One who might be drinking a bit too much.

She wondered what might have happened if things hadn't gone so wrong all those years ago. If they'd stayed neighbors. And friends. . . .

She fell back into sleep, still wondering, and woke again an hour later. Not sharply this time. A gradual, electric awareness that something was changing in her room. She glanced at her travel alarm clock. Four A.M. And yet she was wide awake . . . Light. Her bedroom was suffused with wonderful blue-white light. Not from her bedside lamp. Moonlight.

Slipping out of bed, she padded to the small window. The storm had passed, and a full moon was hovering above the horizon painting a glittering pathway across the water.

And she wasn't the only one admiring it. In the distance she heard coyotes calling, singing to the moon and to each other. The loneliest sound in the world.

It was a moonlit "Sara" night. The kind they used to meet on when they were girls. Drawn like a moth to the light, CeeJay quickly put on a robe and slipped down through the darkened living room out to the moonlit deck.

Sara wasn't there, of course. She wasn't a nine-year-old anymore. She was a working mom with two kids, sensibly sleeping, probably dreaming up new bestsellers.

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A pity. The night was incredibly lovely, the silvery moon gleaming, a rain-sweetened breeze tousling her hair. Clearing her mind of cobwebs and old ghosts.

She stood at the porch rail a long while, thinking, remembering. Moon-dreaming. Until the bite of the night breeze began nibbling through her robe, making her shiver.

Hugging herself for warmth, she padded back through the darkened living room.

"CeeJay? Is something wrong?" Tommy whispered, sitting up on the sofa, knuckling his eyes.

"No, everything's okay. What are you doing up?"

"I'm not up, I'm down," he said sheepishly. "Couldn't sleep, thought I'd try the sofa. What time is it?"

"Almost five. It'll be sunup soon."

"Five?" he groaned. "Good God. So why are you blundering around in the dark?"

"Just enjoying the night. The moon woke me. Can I ask you something?"

"Sure. Shoot."

"Is my being here causing problems between you and Sara? Because if it is, I can be gone first thing in the morning."

"No, no," he said positively. "Our little soap opera's been running since we were kids, nothing to do with you. In fact, I'm glad you're here. And not just because I've got a weakness for redheads. I'm worried about Colin. When I came down a few minutes ago I overheard him talking on the phone in his room."

"To your father?"

"Couldn't be sure, but I think so. When I peeked in he pulled up the covers, pretended to be asleep. That's not good, is it?"

"No," CeeJay admitted, "it's not."

"I love that kid like he was my own, but to tell you the truth, he's starting to creep me out a little. Think you can fix him up?"

"He may not need fixing. In all likelihood, it's all just a game he's made up. Perhaps to get a little attention. You two seemed to be having a great time on the beach today. No phone calls then, right?"

"None. Maybe you're right. Sara's been pretty busy with the baby, maybe Colin's just lonely. Tell you what, why don't we take him along on the hike to your old cottage in the morning? It'll give Sara a break, and you can talk to Colin on the way."

"Sounds like a plan. If it's okay with Sara."

"I'll handle Sara. She'll go along with anything that gets me out of sight. Colin's the one I'm worried about."

"Me too, but it's nothing we can't handle. Good night." Without thinking, she reached out and tousled his hair.

He smiled up at her. "What was that for?"

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"For being a good little brother, what else? I'll see you in the morning."

"Right," Tommy said, still smiling. "I can't wait."

Dawn broke clear and cloudless, flooding the house with morning light, rousing everyone but Tommy, who was snoring softly on the sofa. It was just as well. Sara and CeeJay promptly reverted to childhood, trading jokes and jibes as they bustled around the kitchen assembling a huge, old-fashioned country breakfast.

Blueberry pancakes, scrambled eggs, Canadian bacon, and Texas toast slathered with butter. A cholesterol blast from the past, ten billion scrumptious calories in every bite.

Even Colin joined in, toting and fetching as fast as his stubby legs would carry him. CeeJay noticed the boy seemed preoccupied, though. Almost somber. She tried to josh him out of it. No luck.

Eventually the racket roused Tommy. He stumbled into the kitchen, bleary-eyed, following his nose to the coffeepot. After helping set the table, he tore into his food like a starving wolf.

But not Colin. He dragged his highchair next to Tommy and clambered up without help. But he was only toying with his food.

"Honey, aren't you hungry?" Sara asked. "You love pancakes."

"I don't want you to be mad at me," Colin said quietly.

"Why should I be mad, Colin? What's wrong?"

"It's about Grandpa."

Sara flushed. "Colin, I've told you—all right, what about Grandpa?"

"He called me last night. In my room on my phone."

"After you went to bed, you mean?"

"Yeah, and he was really mad," Colin finished in a rush. "He said you shouldn't have put him in that place and he didn't like you anymore. He said we should go away and never come back."

"Aren't you having a good time here, sport?" Tommy asked, glancing pointedly at CeeJay. "If you want to go home—"

"I like it here okay," Colin mumbled around a mouthful of pancake. "It's Grandpa who wants us to leave. If we don't, he'll hurt us. He said so."

"Colin, I've warned you about that phone," Sara said, visibly trying to control her anger. CeeJay waved her to silence.

"When your grandfather said he'd hurt someone, what did he mean by that?" CeeJay asked.

"I don't know." Colin shrugged. "It's just what he said."

"Forgodsake, don't encourage him," Sara snapped. "I've had enough of this nonsense, Colin. I'm going to smash that phone into—"

"No!" Colin, CeeJay, and Tommy blurted together.

"Whoa!" Sara said, startled into a smile by their reaction. "On second thought, maybe I won't."

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"C'mon, Sara," Tommy said, "cut the kid some slack. It's his favorite toy."

"You'd be the expert on toys with that silly Corvette." Sara sighed. "What's your excuse, CeeJay?"

"It's not fair," CeeJay said simply. "If you want kids to tell you the truth, you can't use what they say to clobber them. Remember what it was like, being a kid?"

"If I forget I can always ask Tommy." She sighed again. "Okay, I guess I'm outvoted. So what should I do?"

"Why do anything?" Tommy asked. "I wouldn't worry about Pop being mad. When we put him in the rest home he could barely remember his name, let alone ours. If he tries to zap us with lightning or whatever he'll probably miss."

"Tommy, this is no joke!"

"Maybe not, but making yourself crazy won't help, Sis. Colin's talking on a plastic phone and you're freaking out? Try making fifty cold calls to drum up business. I'd rather talk to a ghost anytime. Tell you what, Junior, next time Grandpa calls, let me talk to him."

"He's not gonna call anymore," Colin said.

"Why not?" CeeJay asked.

"Because nobody listens to him but me. He just wants us to leave. He'll hurt us if we don't."

"You're sure he said that?" CeeJay asked. "That he'd hurt you?"

"I think so. It was nighttime and I was real sleepy. Can I go play now?"

"Maybe we should take a walk instead," Tommy said, glancing at CeeJay. "Dr. McKenzie's old house burned down. Wanna go see it?"

"Sure. That'll be *waay coool,* Uncle Tommy. Can I, Mom?"

"What about that dog CeeJay saw?"

"We'll keep an eye out for it," Tommy said breezily. "But if it's that old hound that belonged to her grandfather, he won't have any teeth left anyway. Why don't you find a shirt to wear, Colin, we don't want you getting sunburned."

"I've got one in my room. Mom? May I please be excused?"

"Phone calls in the night?" Sara said after Colin left. "This thing is getting out of control."

"Has he had calls in the night before?" CeeJay asked.

"Never. Or at least, not to my knowledge. If he's sitting alone in his room in the dark talking to a ghost . . . I'm really worried, CeeJay."

"Sara, I deal with dysfunctional kids and adults every day, and to me, Colin seems perfectly normal."

"Except when he's talking to the dead," Sara said.

"Kids play games, Sis." Tommy snorted. "The same as we did. There's nothing wrong with Colin a little fresh air and fun won't cure. Wanna come with us?"

"No, I'll stay here with the baby. But be very careful, okay?"

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"Don't worry, Sis. And if we run into Pop, I'll tell him you said hello."

"Tommy, you can be such a jerk!"

"Thanks. I love you, too."

After a quick spritz with insect repellant, the trio set out along the beach with Colin literally running circles around Tommy and CeeJay. The storm had roiled the lake, giving the water a somber cast, dark as a cast-iron kettle.

"So," Tommy said quietly. "Just between us, what do you really think about the nighttime telephone threats? Is my nephew a junior nut job or is my sister overreacting?"

"You know the boy better than I do, what's your vote?"

"Me? Hey lady, I'm just an ex-jock who sells appliances. The only loony I know about is the one I see in the mirror every morning. But I can't say I'm not worried. Talking's one thing, threats are something else."

"Has Colin ever shown any unusually aggressive behavior around you? Hurt himself or tried to hurt anyone else?"

Tommy started to speak, then shook his head.

"What is it?"

"It's nothing. It's crazy."

"Crazy is what I do best. Tell me."

"Okay, but it has to be off the record. Sara's already freaked over this, I don't want to make it worse. The thing is, I've heard this stuff before. The threats."

"When?"

"A few months ago. Colin told me basically the same thing he said this morning, that Dad had warned us to stay away from this place. That he wanted to be left alone here."

"Sara never mentioned it."

"Colin never told her. You saw how she reacts, she gets mad and blows him off. I guess that's why he told me instead. But here's the weird part. Later on, when I tried to talk to him about it, he got upset. Didn't remember telling me about it. Claimed he'd never said any such thing."

"That *is* odd."

"It gets better. Two days after Colin gave me the supposed warning from the grave? I was driving home from work and my Corvette ran off the road. It was like the wheel twisted out of my hands all by itself, swear to God. I was lucky, got off with a few stitches and an insurance claim. More scared than hurt."

"You don't mean—"

"I don't know what I mean, CeeJay. I don't believe in ghosts and I sure as hell don't believe my father would deliberately hurt any of us, dead or alive. I'm only telling you what happened."

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"Did you tell Sara about this?"

"No way. She's already half unglued over the divorce and Colin's toy telephone. Why? Should I have told her?"

"Honesty's usually the best policy. But I can see why you kept it to yourself."

"It seemed wise at the time, but now I'm not so sure. Colin's certainly not improving. Maybe you'd better whip out the shrunken head and juju beads and start dancing."

"What?"

"You're a witch doctor, right? Isn't that what you guys do?"

"You'd better put a cork in that, sport, or I'll have to smack you up for old times' sake. Little brother."

"You'll have to catch me first." Tommy dodged into the shallows, splashing CeeJay as she charged after him, getting into a furious water fight that had them both soaked and laughing in less than a minute.

"Whoa, stop, I surrender," Tommy begged, "kings X, *au secours,* uncle."

"Kings X?"

"I have no idea what that means," he admitted. "I must've read it someplace. . . ." He frowned, scanning the beach. "Where's Colin?"

"He probably ran ahead," CeeJay said. "The ruins are just around the next bend—"

Colin screamed. Instantly CeeJay and Tommy were sprinting, pounding down the shore and over the dunes, scrambling up onto the sea wall together.

Colin was sitting on the path, dazed, tangled up with a pine bough, his face a mask of blood.

"Oh my God," Tommy sobbed, lifting the branch off him, hurling it off the path. CeeJay knelt beside the boy.

"Colin? Are you okay?" she asked, checking his pupils for dilation.

"I think so," he said, his lip quivering, trying not to cry. "I hurt my head."

"What happened, honey? Did the branch fall on you?"

"I tripped and fell down and then *pow!* Something hit me on my arm."

"Pow!" CeeJay echoed his tone. "On your arm? Not your head?"

"Yeah, *pow!* On my arm," he repeated, smiling a little through his tears. "It scratched me, though."

"Well, Mr. Pow," CeeJay smiled, "brace yourself. I have to touch your cut, okay?" Her fingers were already tracing the gash as she spoke. "Okay. How many fingers do you see?"

"Three," the boy said, annoyed. "I just fell down. I didn't knock my brains out."

"You're definitely gonna live." CeeJay pressed a folded handkerchief against the wound.

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"We have to get him to a hospital," Tommy said. "I'll carry him."

"Tommy, it's a half-inch scratch. He doesn't even need a stitch. We'll slap a butterfly bandage on it and he'll be good as new."

"But the blood—"

"—looks awful, I know, but head wounds always bleed a bucketful. Really, he's okay. C'mon, sport," she groaned, helping Colin to his feet. "Let's mop off some of this gore before we give your mom a heart attack."

"I still think we should take him to a hospital," Tommy said stubbornly.

"We will, if he has a headache or the bleeding starts again," CeeJay said.

"Grandpa hurt me," Colin declared solemnly.

"What? Why do you think that, honey?"

"I saw him."

"What do you mean, you saw him?" Tommy asked, swallowing. "Where?"

"Over there," Colin said, pointing to the pines that rimmed the far side of the ruins.

"I don't see anything."

"He's not there now. But he was, I think. Will Mom really have a heart attack?"

"No, I was just kidding, honey. But let's go for a quick wade and clean you up anyway."

"You can't use lake water," Tommy said, still eyeing the ruins uneasily. "God only knows what's in it."

"I'll keep it away from the wound, I just want to—"

"I said no, and he's my nephew! Let's go back to the cottage and clean him up there. And then we'll damned well take him to a hospital."

CeeJay started to argue. But didn't. Tommy was clearly upset. Better to let him cool off on the walk back. She stood aside as he carefully picked Colin up, but as they turned to go, she hesitated. Something had moved on the far side of the clearing. Where Colin claimed he saw his grandfather.

"What's wrong?" Tommy asked.

"Nothing. I think I'll stay a minute. You and Colin go on ahead."

"Stay for what?" Tommy demanded. "For crying out loud, CeeJay, Colin's already been clobbered. Let's get the hell out of here."

"Please, just take Colin back. I'll catch up."

"Suit yourself," Tommy snapped. Cradling Colin carefully, he lowered himself over the sea wall and marched angrily off down the beach. CeeJay watched him go, puzzled at his reaction. Then she shrugged it off. She had troubles of her own.

Taking a deep breath, she turned to face the pines. And her worst nightmares.

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She began scanning the trees across the ruins, one at a time, trying to spot—there. A shadow slightly darker than the other shadows. Crouching. Watching her.

"Lobo?" she whispered. She coughed, trying to clear the tremor from her voice. Enough, damn it!

"Lobo, or whatever your name is, I know you're there. I think. And I know damned well you're not a ghost. So why don't you come out so we can talk."

Swallowing, she began moving toward the shadow, circling the ruins, watching her footing, never taking her eyes off Lobo, the shadow. Or whatever it was.

It was Lobo. As she came closer, the animal rose. A dog. Black as a raven's wing with eyes like coals.

But . . . it wasn't Lobo. As she drew near she could see it wasn't a Chow at all. The ears were too droopy—a Labrador. It was a big black Labrador retriever. A mean one.

The Lab bared his fangs, rumbling a clear warning from deep in his chest.

But CeeJay kept coming. She was so relieved the Lab wasn't a demon from hell that his growl didn't seem so terrible.

"Easy, boy. I'm not going to hurt you. And you don't want to hurt me, either, right?" The Lab's growl grew louder and his eyes seemed to flare.

"Hush!" CeeJay shouted. "Sit!" And incredibly, he did. Startled by her voice, the Lab eased down on his haunches, eyeing her warily as she approached.

"That's better. Easy now. What's your name? It's probably not Lobo, but— Hey! Wait a minute!" Suddenly the Lab wheeled, disappearing into the forest. CeeJay plunged into the brush after him, giving chase. She'd come too far to lose him now!

And she didn't. The dog had a head start but he couldn't make very good time. He was limping badly.

But he was also closer to the ground, able to gimp gamely along the path while CeeJay fought through briars and pine boughs.

Thrashing through the brush for fifty yards felt like ten miles. And then they broke into the open on the shoreline facing the lake. Lobo immediately picked up his pace, limping off down the beach while CeeJay paused to catch her breath.

There was no hurry now. She could see where he was going.

A battered pickup truck was parked near the water a quarter-mile ahead. A guy in a cowboy hat was sitting in a lawn chair adjusting the reel on a willowy surf-casting fishing rod. Faded flannel shirt, grizzled sideburns, leathery face seamed from years in the sun. Eyeing her curiously as she came.

"How you doin', miss?" he called, tipping his hat. "Care for a beer?"

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"No thanks. Is that your dog?" The Lab had taken up a position atop a dune forty yards away, watching them.

"Him? Nah, he ain't mine. He's a drop-off."

"A what?"

"A stray. A drop-off. City folks want to get rid of a dog, they drop it off in the country. Guess they figure dogs can live off the land, but they don't last long. They get killed by cars, or starve, or the coyotes get 'em. A coyote pack jumped that big fella a few days ago. That's why he's limpin' so bad. I throw him a sandwich sometimes when I'm here fishin' but he never comes close. Guess he don't trust people much."

"I don't blame him," CeeJay said, shaking her head. "Poor guy."

"You ain't one of them real estate people, are you, miss?"

"Me? No, I'm staying with friends up the shore. Catherine McKenzie," she said, offering her hand. "People call me CeeJay."

"I'm Lester Hollis. People call me Lester Hollis," he said, flashing a gap-toothed grin. "Sure you won't take a beer, Miss CeeJay? I got plenty."

"You talked me into it, Mr. Hollis. Why did you ask if I was a realtor?"

"They've run me off a few times. They own this whole point now. Got a big housing development planned. I'll be sorry to see it go. I been fishin' this lake forty years. Don't catch much, but I like the view." He passed her a dripping can of Coors Lite. She popped the top and took a long, slow swallow. Sparkling ice bubbles tingled all the way down.

"God, that's good." She licked foam from her upper lip. "Thank you. So tell me about this real estate business. I hadn't heard anything about it."

"It ain't been in the papers, but most folks around here know about it. The developers bought up the last few lots a couple months back. Paid big bucks, too. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious. The people I'm staying with have owned their cottage a long time. They didn't say anything about selling."

"Which cottage would that be?"

"The Sanders house, the big one right at the end of the point."

"Yeah, I know the one. Hap Sanders's summer house. Big ole wreck of a place. His boy's got it now, right? Young blond fella?"

"He and his sister own it together."

"Not anymore. I heard the boy sold it, or optioned it for sale, anyway. A couple of them developer fellas were talkin' about it at the coffee shop in the village."

"You're sure about this?"

"I'm sure it's what they said. Can't swear it's true, but they had no reason to lie about it."

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"No, I guess not," CeeJay said, finishing her beer. "I'd better head back. Thanks for the Coors and the conversation, Mr. Hollis."

"No charge, miss. You keep your eyes open walkin' along this beach, now. Them coyotes are gettin' pretty bold."

"Yeah," CeeJay agreed, "they certainly are."

She glanced back just before she rounded the cove. Hollis was wading back into the surf, waves foaming around his hip boots, casting his long line out over the breakers. He waved and she waved back.

The black Labrador was gone. No sign of him. Vanished as though he'd never been.

Tommy and Sara were waiting on the deck when CeeJay came loping up the beach, Sara holding the baby, Tommy pacing.

"Are you okay?" Sara asked. "You were gone so long we were afraid you'd gotten hurt."

"Hurt? Walking on the beach?" CeeJay trotted up the steps.

"After what happened to Colin, I've been scared stiff, CeeJay."

"A branch happened to Colin, Sara, nothing more. He got a little ding, the same way we did when we were kids."

"He could have been killed! And Tommy told me about wrecking his Corvette. I'm sorry to cut our weekend short but I've had enough, CeeJay. I'm already packed. I'm getting out of here and I'm not coming back."

"Kind of sudden, isn't it?" CeeJay said, glancing at Tommy. "I thought you loved this place."

"I do, but I'm not going to risk anyone else getting hurt."

"This house is a big part of your life, Sara. Shouldn't we at least discuss it?"

"It's none of your business, CeeJay," Tommy said. "It's our place, not yours, and we've already decided. We're selling. There's nothing more to discuss."

"I think there is. Fishing line, for instance."

"What are you talking about?" Sara asked.

"Tommy knows, don't you? Wait here, Sara. There's something I want to show you."

She hurried inside. Colin was napping in his room. She knelt silently by his bed, carefully examining the scratch on his temple. Sara had cleaned it and applied a butterfly bandage. No edema, no bleeding. He'd be good as new in a day or two.

His toy telephone was on his nightstand. Picking it up, she carried it to her own room. It was an old-fashioned phone, with a dial that jingled when it rotated and a receiver on a curly cord. And a receiver that seemed just a little too heavy for a toy.

"Put that down," Tommy said, stepping into the room, closing the door.

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"Why? What am I going to find in it? A miniature baby monitor? Or maybe a walkie-talkie? I'm sure you had no trouble rigging it up, since you're in the appliance business."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"God, Tommy, I wish I didn't. But I stopped on the path where Colin got hurt. Know what I found? A piece of nylon fishing line. A tripwire. You dropped that branch on your own nephew, you miserable son of a bitch!"

"It wasn't supposed to happen that way," he said, pleading. "It was supposed to hit me! Colin got ahead of us. By the time I realized he was gone, it was too late. I swear I never meant to hurt him."

"But for God's sake, why? For the money? I'm sure if you talked to Sara—"

"I tried talking to her! She wouldn't even consider selling. Didn't care that I'm going under financially. She still treats me like I'm her dimwit little brother!"

"Offhand, I'd say she's right. What on earth made you think of calling Colin on his toy phone?"

"It was a game he was playing anyway, pretending to talk to my dad. But it was getting to Sara, so I stuck the monitor in the receiver and buzzed Colin a few times at night. You know me, it was just a joke."

"No, I used to know you, but not anymore. And it was no joke. It was a damned cruel game. My God, what's happened to you?"

"The same thing that happens to everybody, CeeJay. Life. It kicks you in the head and you learn to look out for yourself. Because if you don't, nobody else will. What are you going to tell Sara?"

"Nothing. But you're going to tell her everything. The phone, your phony car crash, and the front money you've probably already taken from the developers. Illegally, I might add. And afterward, maybe we can figure a way to keep you out of jail."

"And if I don't?" he asked with a trace of his old bravado. "I'm still her brother. She'll never believe you."

"Sure she will," CeeJay said, holding up the toy phone. "The only reason I'm not calling the police right now is that we were friends once. But it was a long time ago. It's time to step up and do the right thing, Tommy. Okay?"

He hesitated, then nodded, his shoulders slumping. And for a moment she glimpsed the little brother he'd been. And probably always would be. "Yeah," he said quietly. "Okay."

"Good. And Tommy? The game Colin was playing? Talking to his grandfather? You'd better hope to God it really was a game."

"What do you mean?"

"Considering how things worked out, maybe your dad really *was* listening. And teaching you one last lesson. Think about it."

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"Go ahead, say it," CeeJay sighed.

"Say what?" Mavis asked. "I told you so? No way." They were in her office, CeeJay nursing a cup of coffee, Mavis knitting scarf number three hundred twenty-one. "I told you it was a big mistake to treat a friend's kid. I didn't say anything about rooting out her no-good brother. What's going to happen with them?"

"I don't know. Tommy told her everything, sort of. That he took option money from the developers for property he doesn't actually own, then tried to spook her into selling. He weaseled a little, but it didn't help much."

"She's angry?"

"Angry doesn't cover it. But he's still her little brother and I expect she'll forgive him in the end. I'm not sure how much difference it'll make, though. The summer home is tied up in the divorce proceedings and Sara's husband is being difficult. I doubt she can bail Tommy out even if she wants to. Financially, he's going down the tubes. Bankruptcy, maybe even jail."

"You sound sorry."

"I guess I am, a little. We were pals once, you know? And he's not such a bad guy, he's just weak. Always was."

"And the boy?"

"Colin? He's fine. The phantom phone calls were never more than a game to him. Strictly make-believe. The midnight calls Tommy made to the monitor he planted in the toy confused him a little, but Sara explained it as Uncle Tommy's little joke and Colin accepted it. No problem."

"Kids that age are amazingly resilient. Thank God."

"Amen to that. But it's too bad, in a way."

"What is?"

"That Colin's telephone to forever was a wrong number. Most of us have a few calls we'd put through to the afterlife if we could."

"We probably would," Mavis agreed, arching an eyebrow. "You said this thing was stirring up a lot of unresolved issues from your past. About your grandfather's death?"

"Yeah. I'm still working on that."

"My God, let it go, CeeJay. You were a kid, you made a mistake. Forgive yourself and move on."

"I've tried, Mavis, but it's not that simple. Kid or not, it was a lousy thing to do. Maybe the worst thing I've ever done."

"But you were nine years old. What are you going to do? Carry the guilt around the rest of your life?"

"No. I've tried that. It doesn't work. I guess I'll have to find some other way to settle things up."

"What other way?"

"I can't tell you that."

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"Why on earth not?"

"Because you'd probably have me committed. And you know what they say about therapists who treat their friends."

CeeJay followed the worn ruts to the deserted cove, parking her Volvo where Hollis's pickup had been a few days before. She sat there a moment in silence, savoring the beauty. Hollis was right. The view of Fire Lake was marvelous from here.

After a brief walk to stretch her legs, she began assembling her campsite: pup tent, sleeping bag. Taking her time, breathing the pristine air.

As the sun sank slowly into the lake, she wandered along the shore, gathering driftwood for a small campfire.

Supper was a hot dog sizzling on a stick over the flames. Scorched, smothered in mustard, washed down with an ice-cold beer. Cuisine to rival any five-course meal on the planet.

She was roasting her second wiener when she felt a tingle on the back of her neck, and knew she was being watched.

She glanced casually at the sandy knoll. And there he was. Crouched on the crest. Eyeing her.

"Hi, Lobo," she called quietly. "I'm glad you came. I was afraid the coyotes— Anyway, look, I know Lobo isn't your real name, but I hope you don't mind if I call you that. I've got food here. Want some?"

She held up the wiener. The dog didn't move.

"No? Well, maybe later. Here's the thing, Lobo. I know you don't trust people. And that's okay. Some people aren't very trustworthy. But you can trust me, Lobo. Not because I'm a nice guy. I'm probably not. But I really want to be your friend. I need to be. And if you'll trust me, I promise I'll do my best to make up for the bad times you've had.

"I want to take you home with me. We'll get your leg sewed up, and after that I'll take care of you. Or we can take care of each other. We'll take turns watching for coyotes. Okay?"

If he heard her he gave no sign. But he didn't run away, either. He just crouched there. Watching from the shadows.

And so she put another frank on a stick, humming as it sizzled over the fire, perfuming the night air.

The food would win him over, eventually. And in time, she'd prove she was worthy of his trust.

It might not happen tomorrow. Or the next day. But it would happen.

It had taken her twenty years to come to this place, and to find him again. There was no hurry now. No hurry at all. ●

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

ALICE'S CAT

by Jendi Reiter

Lester woke up with a heavy feeling in his chest, which was nothing new. This time, though, instead of the usual anxious stabbing pain in his breastbone, the pressure inhibiting his breathing was a warm soft weight—furry, in fact, as he discovered by putting his hand to his chest. Oh, it's just the cat, Lester thought, still with eyes closed, then realized: We don't have a cat.

Opening his eyes suddenly, he started to sit up, but the large black cat on top of him shifted position to get a better grip on its recalcitrant human pillow, digging its claws into him in a routine gesture like a bored disciplinarian. Lester lay back down, temporarily defeated. He turned to Alice, who was sleeping next to him. Her dyed gold hair gleamed on the pillow like a smooth new appliance.

"Alice, what's this cat doing here?" he asked in a tone meant to be masterful (she was always telling him to be more masterful at work) but actually sounding querulous and aggrieved as always.

His young wife stirred, looked right at him and the cat which clung to his striped pajamas like a limpet, and asked, "What cat?"

"Oh, come on, don't Gaslight me," he complained. "Surely you can see this damn cat on top of me."

"Lester, what's the matter with you?" she asked crossly. "I knew you were working too hard, but you never hallucinated before. Maybe you should tell your firm that you need some time off. Working on the trading floor is too stressful for a man your age."

Jendi Reiter is a New York City poet whose work has appeared in a number of literary journals, including *Poetry* and *The New Criterion*. What crime the culprits in her story are guilty of is open to interpretation. They've certainly set a dangerous ball rolling—the outcome, if bizarre, is clearly not what they'd foreseen . . .

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"Stop calling me old, and feel this," he said, grabbing her hand roughly and running it over the cat's back. The cat, not liking to be rubbed in that direction, scratched her. Alice didn't flinch—not even the momentary reflex of someone who's pretending to be tough enough to ignore pain. Now that was strange, Lester thought nervously. Alice was usually the type of woman who made much of every little cut and insect bite.

"I don't feel anything but your chest, Lester," she said. "Are you sure you're not trying to Gaslight *me?*"

Deeming that suggestion not worthy of consideration, Lester pushed aside the black and gold down quilt and swung his legs out of bed. This time the cat sprang to the floor at once, as demurely as if it had never made any objection to his getting up in the first place.

As he consumed the coffee and donut that passed for his breakfast, Lester heard the familiar sounds of his wife's lengthy cosmetic processes in the bathroom, and realized that the cat had nowhere to piss. After all, cats that materialize out of thick air (the air in New York in the summer could scarcely be called thin) don't typically bring litter boxes with them, or so he assumed. A quick peek around the bathroom door assured him that there was indeed no such object present. Well, let the beast piss on the floor. Natural or supernatural, if dirt was there, Alice would find it. Meanwhile, he'd be on the golf course with his bosses from Morgan Stanley.

His next-door neighbor Charlie was at the door. "Sorry to bother you this early on a Sunday morning, Les, but I just wanted to see if Alice felt like coming jogging with me while you're off golfing." The tall man bounced back and forth slightly on his muscular legs in a peppy athletic way that Lester thought annoyingly pretentious.

"She's still in the bathroom," Lester answered, glancing towards that room. He noticed the cat sitting on the table sniffing his empty dishes. "Come on in a moment."

Charlie strode in. "Can I get you some coffee?" Lester asked.

"No, thanks," he replied. The cat lay down on the table and stared at Charlie suspiciously.

"Maybe this sounds like a strange question, but just play along with me for a moment," Lester began. The other man nodded. "Could you—sort of—describe what you see on the table?"

"Well, there's a coffee cup, a saucer, a spoon, and an empty plate. There's also a tablecloth," he added hopefully, as if expecting a gold star for this extra attention to detail.

"Nothing else?" asked Lester in desperation.

"Nope. Say, is this some kind of magic trick?"

"I wish I knew," said Lester. Though aware he was leading the

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witness, so to speak, he had no choice but to ask, "Are you sure you don't see a cat?"

"Sure I'm sure. That would be pretty hard to miss. What's going on?"

Just then Alice came out of the bathroom, dressed smartly in a white blouse and pink shorts that matched her fingernails. Charlie repeated his request for a jogging partner, and she assented.

"Have fun golfing, Lester, but stay out of the sun as much as you can. You don't want any more episodes like the one this morning—though I'm sure you were probably just half asleep or something. You don't see any cats now, do you?" she asked in the benevolently coercive tone of a nursery school teacher.

"No, I guess you're right," he said with a sickly smile, trying to ignore the claws poking insistently at his ankles.

He tried to concentrate on his newspaper as his train rushed out of the city like a dirty gray stream of water. But how much of what he read was still reliably real? Lester was hardly given to metaphysical speculations, but most people, if only as children, have known the terrible thrill of wondering whether the world they perceive is simply a show projected by their mind onto the screen of a solitary darkness. Perhaps the man next to him, who seemed to be studying the sports page with a crestfallen air, was actually reading about a disaster that Lester's own paper kept hidden from him. Worse yet, the reporters themselves might be afflicted with Lester's strange new malady, sending reports of fire and murder from cold, unpopulated buildings.

A firm believer in majority rule, he scarcely considered the possibility that he alone might be a visionary, might be right. Besides, visionaries usually saw something useful or inspiring, like Jesus or the winning Lotto numbers, not bad-tempered hairy cats.

The sun beat down on his balding head while he played golf.

All that business about the cat had made him forget his cap, and he was damned if he'd ask one of these jumped-up business-school graduates who styled themselves vice-presidents. With hair like theirs, they probably didn't even need sun hats, and would laugh at anyone who did.

The green hills wavered in the distance like an alligator's back underwater. Lester had the crazy thought that soon they would writhe and change shape, a lazy reptile's commonplace motion that would startle only the man who was laughed at, left out of the loop. Even if Alice and Charlie were conspiring to play a simple trick on him (which he doubted—intellectually, Charlie was a few weights short of a barbell), Lester still felt bewildered and mocked, like an unpopular child who dares not betray the extent of his exclusion by asking the others what secret is making them giggle.

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That was why, when the golf ball hurtled towards his head at an extraordinary velocity, he was too unsure of himself to duck in time. His last half-formed thought was: *The guy behind me doesn't see anything, so maybe I shouldn't make a fool of—*

The impact of the golf ball on his temple caused a blood vessel in Lester's brain to burst, and he fell backwards onto the grass. The man behind Lester, whose beer-hazed perceptions had been Lester's last unreliable lodestar, bent over him in shock.

"Jesus! I think he's dead!" he exclaimed to his fellow mid-level executives.

Meanwhile, Alice and Charlie, sweaty from a morning of pastimes such as jogging, were relaxing in her shower. The telltale litter box, formerly hidden in the closet, was under the sink.

"Why did we have to pretend not to see the cat?" he asked while washing her back.

"I told you, I just wanted to play a little trick on Lester. He's such a schmo, I knew he'd fall for it. When he gets home, maybe I'll tell him about it. This will teach him a lesson to be more assertive at work and not just believe everyone else knows better than he does."

"Well, I've got to take that cat back to the pet shop. I'll tell the guy I bought it for my girlfriend but she turned out to be allergic. Hope he takes it back—I don't want to be stuck with a bad-luck cat."

"Oh, Charlie, it's stupid to be so superstitious. Maybe you should stop watching *The X-Files* so often."

He pushed the plastic curtain aside, and reached for a towel as he stepped out without looking at the floor. The cat was under his feet, and he tripped and fell heavily against the marble tub, striking his head fatally on the rim. Alice screamed, mainly from dismay at the prospect of explaining Charlie's naked body on her bathroom floor to the paramedics.

The black cat regarded her balefully, then bared its piercing teeth in a yawn and slowly faded from sight. ●

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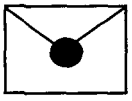

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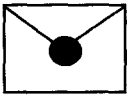

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SWITCHOVER

by Donald Olson

Donald Olson has selected a classic mystery theme for this story: the switching of identities by miscreants wishing to evade the consequences of their acts. But in his hands, as always, the familiar gets a new spin. Mr. Olson's characters are people we feel we might meet in everyday life, not the larger-than-life protagonists of so much current popular fiction—and all the better for it! ✝

The day I ran into Dylan Moran at the racetrack lounge I was bankrupt both financially and emotionally, no longer deluding myself into believing the next race would restore my fortunes. I'd lost my wife, numerous jobs, and my self-respect to the gambling lust. More to the point, my promises to pay off my creditors were being met with threats of a nature most unpleasant to contemplate. I was truly desperate.

Dylan spotted me first. "Nicky! Nicky Blake! My God, man, it's been ages."

"How've you been, Dylan? You're looking great." As sleek and smartly turned out and looking hardly older than when we'd last met some ten years earlier at one of those Westwood reunions of Old Boys that I no longer attended.

"Let me buy you a drink," he said, clapping me on the back. "Name your poison."

"Poison," I replied, straightfaced. "Something sweet, deadly, and fast-acting."

Dylan grinned, showing beautifully capped teeth in a lean, tanned face. "Not your lucky day, pal?"

"Not my lucky year."

"Let's grab a table and talk about it."

Both Dylan and I had come from well-off families who could afford to send us to Westwood, a moderately prestigious prep school in New Hampshire. We'd become friends, but aside from exchanging Christmas cards for a couple of years after graduation, we'd lost touch. His last card informed me that he was "grub-

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bing on Wall Street, one of those nobody drones." Me? I'd ended up selling used cars after squandering the modest legacy from my parents on horses who must have had a grudge against me.

With a few double whiskeys to relax my inhibitions, I was soon spilling into Dylan's ears the full extent of my troubles. He was a good listener.

In-between passages of this mournful litany I learned that Dylan was fed up with his current job and looking for a fresh challenge.

When I ran out of words, Dylan continued to regard me with the concentration of a loan officer scrutinizing a pauper's overdraft. Finally, as I stared moodily into my glass, he said bluntly: "Precisely how much would it take to get these clowns off your back?"

I answered just as forthrightly, "Four grand would pay them off and get me back on my feet."

"What would you do to get your hands on that sum?"

"Are you kidding? Sell my soul if it wasn't already in hock."

"Then listen to me. I've heard of a position opening up in one of the biggest Chicago investment firms. A plum job. The step-up I've been waiting for. There's only one hitch. If I applied, I'd be vetted as thoroughly as a Pentagon clerk applying for a top job in the CIA. Once they found out I had a criminal record I wouldn't stand a nun's chance in a strip joint of being considered."

This confession startled me back from the edge of insobriety. "A criminal record? You're not serious."

"Regrettably, I am. When I was a lot younger, just out of college and traveling around the country before settling down, I got myself in a jam out west. Nothing heavy, but this was Texas and you know what they're like out there. A few snorts of cocaine and they throw the book at you. Point is, I do have a record; I can't erase it. However . . ."

Here he paused long enough to light up a cigarette. "Now this idea didn't just pop into my head. I've been giving it a lot of thought, but until I ran into you now I saw no way to make it work."

I couldn't fathom what he was leading up to. "What idea?"

"No one knows me in Chicago. If I were to apply for the job under another name, the name of someone with a spotless record, my chances would be much better."

"Dylan, what exactly are you suggesting?"

He leaned forward, excitement quickening his voice.

"What if I were to give you that four grand—I can well afford to—and you were to give me your ID? See what I'm saying?"

I nearly burst out laughing. "You mean switch identities? You and me?"

"Spot on, buddy."

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I couldn't believe he'd overlooked the most apparent obstacle. "Now back up a minute. You said you'd be thoroughly vetted. If your would-be employers checked out Nicholas Blake, they'd find him hardly qualified. Last regular job a used-car salesman. And not even that now."

Dylan smiled, a mischievous smile that took me back to our school days. "No problem. All requests for information go to the personnel manager of the outfit I've been working for. It so happens he owes me a favor. If he were to refuse to cooperate, he'd find himself not only unemployed but unemployable. Possibly even charged with a crime. I've got something on him—and he knows it—that he'd do anything to keep secret. He'll send my prospective employer a glowing report on Nicholas Blake."

"My God, Dylan, I'd never have believed you could be so devious."

"Resourceful is the word."

"I still can't believe you're serious. It's too wild."

Dylan reached into his pocket and drew out his checkbook.

"Will a check for four grand convince you?"

"I'd prefer cash."

For about a year before I ran into Dylan I'd been employed as caretaker, living in the guesthouse, on an estate owned by a Japanese industrialist named Itokuru. He occupied the house for only a few weeks in the year and its isolation suited me admirably. My wages were paid under the table. Itokuru, though rich, was that sort of guy.

To say I'd had no second thoughts after rashly agreeing to Dylan Moran's switchover proposal would not be true. Had I not been so desperate, I'd have given the matter more serious consideration. Now that I was not desperate, and with hindsight, certain disturbing questions arose to trouble me.

How could Dylan have been so certain of getting that "plum of a job" that he would part with that much cash, even granted it was hardly the windfall amount to him that it was to me? And how could he be so certain he could blackmail that personnel officer into colluding with him to deceive the Chicago firm? There had to be more to his scheme than he'd told me. What he had told me simply didn't make sense.

From the track that day Dylan had accompanied me to the guesthouse where, in exchange for the cash, I'd given him all the cards and documents of identity I possessed, among them my driver's license, birth certificate, and social security card. In return, he'd left with me proofs of his own identity. "It's up to you if you want to use them," he said.

Which, of course, I didn't. I had no intention of ceasing to be

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Nicholas Blake. No doubt there were a number of Nicholas Blakes in the country. It was not that unusual a name. Pretending my wallet had been stolen, I acquired duplicates of those items I'd given Dylan. There would be no problem with the IRS. I had no bank accounts, earned no reportable income from interest or investments.

I didn't own a car, nor did I need one, having the use of a Nissan pickup truck belonging to the estate.

Dylan and I had agreed there should be no further contact between us.

Experience and a great deal of will power finally cured me of my addiction to gambling. For the time being, at least, I was prepared to settle for the life I was beginning to enjoy, solitary though it was. My work around the estate kept me fully occupied. I'd always been an avid reader, and I enjoyed working out and fishing in the lake bordering the estate. On Friday nights I drove into the nearby village and spent a few hours at a tavern where I'd made a few casual acquaintances.

Rarely, but often enough to keep me satisfied, I might meet a woman as free of domestic encumbrances as myself. These relationships ranged from one-night stands to the briefest of affairs. I regarded my life as a long, pleasant period of convalescence from the past.

It never occurred to me that I might be living in a fool's paradise until one afternoon, three years after I'd seen the last of Dylan Moran, I received a visit from the police: two detectives, O'Malley and Kramer, who informed me they were attached to the Chicago police fraud squad. They were both softspoken and polite, and after I'd invited them into the house lost no time in explaining the purpose of their visit. One of them asked me to look at a photograph.

"Do you know this man?"

It was a picture of Dylan Moran. I tried to still the tremor in my fingers as I pretended to study it.

"No, I don't."

"Have you ever seen him?"

"Not that I can recall." All manner of dire presentiments invaded my mind.

"Can you explain how the man in that photograph might have come to be using your ID?"

I started to hand back the photograph and then paused, assuming an expression of sudden enlightenment. "Good Lord, you mean you've caught him?"

Their interest visibly rose. "You mean you do recognize him?"

"No. But when was it? At least three years ago I had my wallet

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stolen. At the time, I could only assume someone must have lifted it when I was at the racetrack."

Their faces revealed neither scepticism nor belief. "What did it contain?"

"A little money. Driver's license, library card, social security card. No credit cards, thank goodness, I never use them." I hesitated, unwilling to be told what I most feared. "Are you saying you've traced the person who stole my wallet?"

Kramer shook his head. "Not yet. The man we're after is a fugitive. He absconded from a Chicago investment firm with assets worth a great deal of money."

At least they did not have Dylan in custody. I asked them what put them on to me. O'Malley said, "The Chicago DMV. Blake—or whoever he is—gave this as his previous address when he applied for an Illinois driver's license."

Thanks a lot, Dylan, I said to myself. "Well, I wish I could be of more help."

"We wish you could, too. But you've explained part of the mystery. Unfortunately it puts us back to square one."

Needless to say, it was a long time before I could relax after their departure. I couldn't help feeling I'd got off the hook too easily, and wondered if it would have been wiser to tell them the truth. What could they have done to me? Toward Dylan I felt only rage and bitterness.

The full extent of my folly in ever having agreed to his harebrained proposal filled me with self-disgust. And I wondered now if Dylan had always been a crook, what other nefarious deeds might be hidden in his past.

I could only hope he would remain a fugitive.

Life went on, as it always does. But I'd lost that feeling of security and contentment I'd enjoyed for the past few years. I felt a reluctance to leave the house, as if I, too, were in hiding. I never went into town except to buy those things I needed. More than once I toyed with the idea of moving away. I'd saved a fair amount of money. I could go away and start a new life, find a job somewhere and try to forget Dylan Moran and the possible danger his misdeeds had created for me.

In time, of course, that sense of constant underlying tension gradually diminished. I resumed my old habits.

And then, one rainy night in autumn, as I sat in my cozy living room reading a Trollope novel I'd taken from the library, there came a knock at the door.

As I rarely had visitors, and certainly not that late at night, it could only be the police. They'd caught up with Dylan and he'd implicated me. How stupid of me to have grown complacent.

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I put aside my book, tried to adopt an air of unworried composure, and went to the door, taking a deep breath before opening it.

A dark figure brushed by me into the room. He wore a knee-length leather coat and a cap pulled low over his forehead. He turned and smiled at me. It was Dylan Moran.

"Hello, Nicky. Sorry to barge in like this."

"For God's sake, Dylan, what are you doing here?"

He pulled off his cap, shrugged out of his coat, and dropped into the nearest chair. "Well, at the moment I could use a drink."

"I've nothing in the house."

"Hell of a host you are, old buddy." His tone and manner were as debonair as always.

"Dylan, before you say another word, you'd better know the cops were here. Chicago dicks. They told me everything."

"When was this?"

"A couple of months ago."

"Sorry about that. I never dreamed they'd get on to you."

"You might have known they would." I told him what had happened.

"Were they satisfied?"

"They didn't arrest me, if that's what you mean. God, Dylan, I knew you were a devious bastard, but I never thought you were a crook. How could I have let you talk me into that crazy scheme?"

He tucked his head to one side and grinned at me. "You've still got your kneecaps, haven't you?"

His air of unconcern enraged me. "Was any of what you told me true? About the job in Chicago and the personnel man you were going to bribe?"

Dylan looked as coy as a schoolgirl debating whether to kiss an importunate boyfriend. "To some extent. I really did require a new identity, and not a phony one. As for the rest, the less you know, the better. Look, if you're out of booze you could at least rustle me up a sandwich and a cup of coffee."

"Not until you tell me what you're doing here."

He dropped the devil-may-care pose. "Nicky, I've got to get out of the country. It's my only chance of escaping the wolves."

"Then why don't you?"

"One slight problem," he said. "No passport. I know you've got one. You and your wife went to France on your honeymoon. You sent me a card, remember? I forgot about that when we made our deal."

"With my picture on it?"

He looked at me as if I were hopelessly naive. "It won't *have* your picture on it."

"But they'd be watching for you at every airport in the country."

"I didn't say I'd *fly* out."

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I think, if anything, it was his audacity in coming to me, expecting me not to argue but to give him what he wanted as readily as I'd agreed to sell him my ID, that hardened my resolve. "Forget it, Dylan. I've learned my lesson. I trusted you once. Never again. You'll have to get out of the country without my help."

"I saved your butt once, Nicky. Have you forgotten?"

"Sorry, Dylan."

He glanced at his watch. "Nicky, I haven't got time to argue. Give me the passport."

"No way."

He sprang up, reached for his coat, and put it on as if accepting defeat. He slipped a hand into a pocket and I found myself looking straight into the barrel of a stubby automatic. Again the half-smile. "Time's awasting. The passport, please."

I shouldn't have been surprised, and yet I was. Had I ever truly known this person, even as a schoolboy?

"It's in my desk, in the bedroom."

He followed me in there, gun at my back. I retrieved the key from a hook under the kneehole, unlocked the bottom drawer, and rummaged for the passport. Neither of us spoke.

Instinct warned me that I'd become a threat to Dylan, as he, too, must have realized. Could I be sure that this man who was a virtual stranger to me would simply walk out and leave me behind unharmed? As I handed him the passport he took it in his free hand, glancing down at it. Scarcely aware of the risk I was taking, I struck out at the hand holding the gun. He clung to it as I drove my other fist into his chest. He lunged forward, grappling me to him, fighting to regain control.

I was never altogether sure what happened next. As we struggled, the gun went off, and Dylan was slipping through my arms onto the floor, blood spurting from his throat.

Dylan was dead. That I had killed a man, even if it was in self-defense, left me too shaken to do anything but stumble from the room and collapse into a chair, clutching my head in my hands. I don't know how long I remained there, but when I finally roused myself it was starting to get light outside.

I felt that it would be madness to call the police. I never once even considered it, which meant I had to get rid of Dylan's body. After discarding a number of ideas, I ended up bundling the body into the passenger seat of his car. Only then did I think to unlock the trunk and drag out Dylan's suitcase. I'd already emptied his pockets. In the house I unlocked the suitcase with one of the keys from his pocket. Aside from clothes, there was only a briefcase. Among other papers, it contained, to my astonishment, a bundle of bearer bonds totaling $300,000.

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Later, I drove Dylan's car into the lake and watched it sink from sight.

I called Itokuru's business manager and told him that personal reasons obliged me to terminate my employment. I knew I could no longer stay where I was. The awareness that Dylan's body, entombed in his car, was so close at hand would have been endlessly unnerving.

With the money I'd saved, I bought myself a car, registering it in Dylan's name, for from now on I must be Dylan Moran. The authorities were looking for Nicholas Blake, not Dylan Moran. I was glad now I hadn't destroyed those proofs of identity Dylan had left with me. My plan was to drive to Mexico, where I felt that with part of Dylan's stolen funds I should be able to locate one of those shady characters who make a business of supplying forged passports. From there I would fly to Europe or South America.

As I drove toward the Southwest, I daydreamed about the future I could build for myself now that I'd no longer have to scratch for a living. For once in my life I had gambled and won.

I stopped for a couple of days in Arizona, wishing I could end my journey there. The clear blue sky and warm, dry desert air I found mentally and physically stimulating.

I'd decided to cross the border at Tijuana, but then changed my mind and backtracked into Texas, thinking it might be safer to cross over there.

All went well until I was on the point of doing so at Brownsville. There I was arrested as a fugitive from justice, as the Dylan Moran who had skipped bail and vanished after being charged with a felony offense fifteen years earlier. The criminal act he'd so blithely confessed to me was far more serious than a drug bust. It was manslaughter.

Had he been masquerading as someone else ever since, I wondered, a man of many names, many criminal enterprises? Had he ever used his real name until the day he met me at the racetrack?

Yet I was not unduly worried. My fingerprints would prove I was not *that* Dylan Moran. There would be some sticky moments, but eventually they would have to release me. I would resume my trip into Mexico.

At that point my luck ran out, as it had so often done when I'd tried to beat the odds at the track. The package of bearer bonds with which at the last moment I'd included my passport, rather than destroying it, and which I was so certain I'd cleverly hidden in my car, was discovered. I was taken from the cell where I was being detained into an interrogation room. One of the border-patrol officers laid the open package on the table between us.

"It would appear, sir," he said, "that you have a lot more explaining to do." ●

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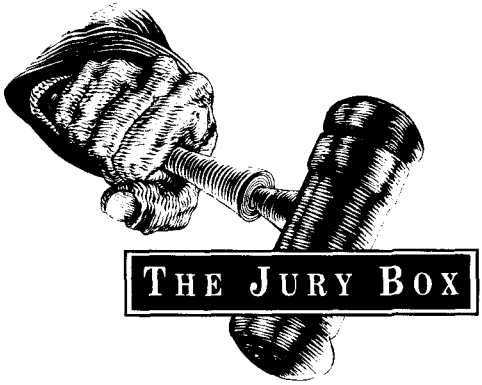

by Jon L. Breen

The detective story in its finest between-the-World-Wars flower was an author-vs.-reader game as much as a literary genre. And how literary it was, could be, or should be was a matter of controversy. In the crime fiction field today, one of the writers with the greatest literary ambition is also one of its most ardent games players. Though some readers might call Reginald Hill, as one of his Yorkshire characters might say, too clever by half, he has produced the most elaborate, deceptive, dazzling, and (to the right language-obsessed reader) fair puzzle I've seen in years.

**** Reginald Hill: *Dialogues of the Dead,* Delacorte, $23.95. A series of otherwise unconnected deaths are linked by anonymous entries in a short-story contest sponsored by a local newspaper and public library. As the carnage rises, the pressure mounts on plain-spoken "Fat Man" Andy Dalziel and university-educated Peter Pascoe, one of the great odd-couple police teams in the literature. The attentive reader who shares Hill's love of wordplay may foresee at least some of the novel's unfolding secrets, but it will take a genius to get them all. The manner of Hill's final revelation must be unique in detective fiction annals.

**** Thomas H. Cook: *The Interrogation,* Bantam, $23.95. In September 1952, a team of big-city detectives, operating under different rules from their counterparts today, are given one last chance, an eleven-hour marathon interrogation, to wring a confession out of a homeless suspect in the murder of a little girl. If they fail, he must be set free. The novel follows the questioning, interrupted by flashbacks and changes of scene, leading to a startling series of reversed expectations. Cook, whose eloquent style and incisive exploration of theme and character consistently place him a cut above most of the competition,

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also erects a remarkable plot structure, including a well-foreshadowed variation on one of the great detective-fiction misdirections. Is there too much small-world coincidence? Maybe, but it's forgivable.

*** Mat Coward: *In and Out,* Five Star, $24.95. The London team of Detective Inspector Don Packham, the manic-depressive veteran, and Police Constable Frank Mitchell, his straight-arrow family-man subordinate, may occasionally remind you of earlier combos like Joyce Porter's Dover and MacGregor or Colin Dexter's Morse and Lewis, but they are as fresh and original as their creator's droll narrative voice. In their second case, following *Up and Down,* they investigate murder among the members of a pub darts team. The suspects are vividly characterized, and the observations of the customs and rituals of the sport are vastly entertaining. The title pattern suits the employment of a bipolar detective.

*** Michael Connelly: *City of Bones,* Little, Brown, $25.95. Los Angeles cop Harry Bosch, one of the most interesting and complex series sleuths now operating, investigates when the twenty-years-buried bones of an abused child are found in the Hollywood Hills. His more laid-back partner, Jerry Edgar, plays a larger role than in other series entries. This is not quite as fine a classical puzzle as some earlier Connellys, but like the three books reviewed above, it will delight readers for whom whodunit is the name of the game.

*** Tony Hillerman: *The Wailing Wind,* HarperCollins, $25.95. The novels about retiree Joe Leaphorn and his former subordinate Jim Chee, still of the Navajo Tribal Police, have taken on the comfortable (dare I say cozy?) feel of a visit from old friends. Both sleuths are more relaxed and talkative than in their early days, and their cases have more humor and less real tension. This time, the older detective takes on a semi-private-eye role for a convicted murderer searching for his missing wife in a case involving a legendary lost gold mine and a mysterious wailing voice. Obligatory for series fans. Newcomers should try the older titles first.

*** Peter Godfrey: *The Newtonian Egg and Other Cases of Rolf le Roux,* Crippen & Landru, $25 hardcover, $15 trade paper. The first volume in the publisher's Lost Classics Series collects the stories of a gifted South African writer in the classical tradition. Five of them appeared in *EQMM* between 1949 and 1952, a sixth in *Ellery Queen's Prime Crimes 4* (1986); the other four are new to U.S. publication. Rolf le Roux is a civilian advisor to the Cape Town homicide squad, and his cases often involve impossible crimes and non-science-fictional time paradoxes.

*** Craig Rice: *Murder, Mystery, and Malone,* Crippen &

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Landru, $27 hardcover, $17 trade paper. The second Lost Classics entry comes from a writer more widely remembered if little read today. Ten of the dozen previously uncollected stories, first published between 1947 and 1960, feature her most famous character, Chicago lawyer John J. Malone, the other two inconspicuous private eye Melville Fairr. Three first appeared in *EQMM,* while several others are from the long defunct and fondly remembered digests *Manhunt* and *The Saint Detective Magazine.* Rice's humor and offbeat puzzle-spinning deserve a new generation of readers. Jeffrey Marks, whose 2001 biography of Rice, *Who Was That Lady?,* received an Edgar nomination, provides an introduction and story notes.

Eventually we may get the best of Ellery Queen in audio readings: great early puzzles like *The Egyptian Cross Mystery* (1932) or *The Siamese Twin Mystery* (1933); the groundbreaking Wrightsville novels, beginning with *Calamity Town* (1942); and works of the team's peak years like the serial-killer classic *Cat of Many Tails* (1949), the dark Hollywood tale *The Origin of Evil* (1951), and the locked-room masterpiece *The King is Dead* (1952). For now, though, we have another novel from the Queen team's transitional period, 1937's *The Door Between* (Audio Partners, $29.95), expertly read by Blain Fairman. Like the previously released *The Dragon's Teeth* (1939), it has a strong element of romantic suspense with a private eye as love interest. The puzzle, though submerged for long intervals under the weight of the slick-paper love story, is expectedly devious and complex. The final scene is as dramatic as it is unique.

Max Allan Collins's Edgar-nominated *The History of Mystery* (Collectors Press, $45) is a heavily illustrated coffee-table book with an intelligent and (with the exception of a sidebar or two) accurate text. Though there are nods to Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie, the emphasis is American, with strongest coverage of dime novels, pulp magazines, paperbacks, and TV adaptations. Of wider scope but more error prone is the trade paperback reprint of Bruce F. Murphy's 1999 volume, *The Encyclopedia of Murder and Mystery* (St. Martin's Minotaur, $24.95). Despite some careless mistakes and sloppy editing, the acute critical commentary makes this a worthwhile reference.

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

LONG SHOT

by Neil Schofield

Abbott had nothing to do after he set up the long gun on the tripod by the window, just near enough to the opening to give him the clear view he needed but far enough back not to be spotted from outside. It was a warm summer afternoon, and the hotel-room window would remain in the shade from now on, so he had no worries about stray reflections. He had looked through the 10-power scope sight at the target window. He had looked through the sight at the street outside the target building. Everything was crystal sharp.

He had walked it through at least three times in the past few days and he had the range to a yard, so there were no worries there. He had cleaned the Remington and dismantled and checked the custom-built silencer at least twice in the last twenty-four hours. He had loaded the rounds himself: 60 grains of smokeless powder to push a 175-grain hollow-point four hundred yards. No wind to worry about. So now, with the long gun set up and locked, three polished rounds placed neatly on the chair at its side, the window open and wedged, the curtain Scotch-taped just so, in case

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of a sudden warm breeze, he had nothing to do for three hours. At least.

He had not even brought a newspaper. The room was completely devoid of interest. He had opened a drawer in the bedside table and had found only a Gideon Bible. No thanks.

He would have liked to lean out of the window to look into the street, but he didn't do it, even though the building opposite was all offices, and all closed because of the public holiday so that there was no one to see him anyway. He had his habits and one of them was to take as few unnecessary risks as possible.

2001's third-place Readers Award winner, Neil Schofield, is becoming a regular contributor to our pages. And as if to validate your selection of his darkly comic "Groundwork" as a Readers Award finalist, a radio producer recently contacted *EQMM* in the hope of turning the tale into a radio play. Mr. Schofield's latest story is as full of twists and ironies as "Groundwork." Enjoy!

Besides, there was nothing to see even if he had looked out of the window. Here in a mainly business district, on a public holiday, there was little or no traffic and only the occasional pedestrian, just the street simmering quietly in the hot summer air.

He had taken off his jacket while he was working. Now he put it on again and sat in the armchair, staring in front of him.

He should have brought a newspaper. No, there were no newspapers on public holidays. Well, he could have brought one of yesterday's.

He could take a nap. No, that was a ridiculous thought. That was all he needed, to go to sleep on the job, wake up too late, or, as bad, just in time and have to take a shot with his eyes bleary and his head muzzy.

Three hours from now or about that, Stubbs was going to come down from the target room and stand outside the building. There he would either wipe his brow with a handkerchief or he wouldn't. If he didn't, Abbott would pack up and go home. If he did, Abbott would make the shot.

"Why," Abbott had asked him, "do you want it done while you're still in the neighbourhood? That could be a bit—well, compromising, couldn't it?"

Stubbs had looked at him through a cloud of cigar smoke. He was drinking a single-malt whisky. Abbott had a beer. They were sitting in a quiet room behind one of the many bars that were just a part of Stubbs's fief. Abbott didn't like Stubbs much. Stubbs was fat, and Abbott hated people who were fat. They always seemed to

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be sweating. He himself was thin, and sweated very little.

"I'm going to have a conversation with this man," Stubbs said. "I'm going to make him an offer. And it's not that bad of an offer, let me say right away. If he takes it, well and good, we go on to the next time, the next problem, because there are always going to be problems with this man, know what I mean? He doesn't take the offer, I leave the room with good grace, thank you very much, bye-bye, and he's on the phone straightaway causing mischief, sowing discontent, stirring up people's feelings. And that I don't want happening. If he says no, immediately I want it done, like that, *ba-bing,* no second chances, no coming back with counteroffers that are simply a waste of time and not worth the paper they're printed on. So, he gets popped and I happen to be passing in the neighbourhood visiting friends who live close-by and I am a man with a lot of friends, so what? This is a man who has a lot of enemies. Me included."

Abbott nodded. "Do I get to know the name?"

"I won't even tell you his name, you don't need his name, I can't bear to speak it. Okay, I'll tell you his name, what the hell. He calls himself Buryatin. He has a place in the Causeway, you know it, building that has a lot of fancy apartments for executives with balconies that look as if someone just chucked a load of cement blocks in the air, no symmetry, no system, disgusting what they call design today. I know also what they charge for those places, I made it my business to find out, because it's me that's helping pay for that place, know what I mean?"

Abbott nodded.

"You, Abbott, you're the one I'm going to be depending on. I know what you're going to say: Have I ever messed up? Well, no is the answer. You've done some good work, and I'd like that to continue into the future. But for that to happen, there has to *be* a future. And if you miss the shot, I can't tell you how miserable life is going to be not just for you, but for a whole lot of us. So, I come out of the building and give you the sign, you shoot the bastard, no questions."

Abbott nodded again.

"Set it up how you like, let me know. I don't know, walk through it a few times, get the feel of the neighbourhood. Then come back and tell me where I got to look to give you a sign, and what sort of sign you want, you're the expert, I don't know, perhaps you want me to turn a cartwheel or eat a tuna fish sandwich, that's your business. Tell me what I have to do to be clearly visible where you are. Anything you want to make the job go well, you get. But you make it go well, hear? No second chances, no coming saying I had something in my eye or what rotten luck, I was dazzled by a chance reflection. Mess this up, and you're history, Abbott."

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Abbott had nodded and left.

Now he looked around the room. It was your standard hotel room: bed, dressing table doubling as desk, wardrobe, armchair. Television. No mini-bar. He'd been clear on that when he booked the room, as he'd been clear on the particular room he wanted. He liked a drink, and three hours of a hot afternoon with nothing to do in a hotel room would be too much to resist.

He was beginning to regret that decision now. Perhaps he could have asked for a mini-bar with no alcohol, just soft drinks. But then that would have drawn attention and he didn't like drawing attention. But he would have liked something, a mineral water with some ice, something like that.

He got up, took off his jacket, and walked into the bathroom. He turned on the cold-water tap and let it run for a good minute. The surgeon's gloves were making his hands sweat, so he peeled them off. He looked at himself in the mirror. There were shadows under his eyes, all right, that was normal, and perhaps his face was a bit thinner than it used to be. But he still had plenty of hair, more than most men he knew.

He cupped his hands and let the water cool them, then he rinsed his face and wiped his hands through his hair. That felt better. Back in the bedroom, he opened a new packet of gloves and put them on, throwing the packet and the old pair into his case.

Okay. That was two minutes wasted. What now? He should have thought to bring something to read. He was not much of a one for books, but a magazine would have been good. He was a man of simple tastes: What he liked best were the gun magazines, *Guns & Ammo,* things like that. He especially liked magazines with "Readers' Queries," which he read with his hand covering up the answer to see how close his answer was to the editor's. Usually his answer was better, more precise.

He crouched over the Remington and looked through the scope again, not because there was any need, but for something to do. He tightened the focus a hair. There was no movement in the sixth-floor apartment four hundred yards away, but the balcony doors were open now, so there was somebody there all right. He saw a movement, and then Buryatin walked into the lounge from another room, carrying a glass. He sat down on the sofa and drank. He picked up a paper, glanced at it, and then got up and walked over to something that was out of view. Then he went and sat down again. He was staring fixedly into the middle distance. Abbott was puzzled for a moment. Ah. The television. He had turned on the television. He watched as the man picked up a telephone and dialled. Perfect. Do it just like that, sitting on the sofa. Don't change a thing.

Abbott stopped looking. Now he really had nothing to do.

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He had a television, too. He turned it on.

It was a public-holiday afternoon, so of course they were going to show *The Great Escape* for the three-hundredth time, and on another channel there was a James Bond film with Roger Moore, but he only liked the Bond films with Sean Connery in them.

He flipped through the channels. *Nada.* A chat show. What could they be finding to chat about? Why weren't they outside getting some air? He flipped. Chat show. Chat show. Film. Chat show. Race meeting.

He decided to stay with the horses, because at least there was a bit of movement and some interest. He looked at the horses walking round the paddock. He had never had much interest in horses, not as horses. They were all the same. But as a package of abilities and form, a horse was as interesting as anything else. He had bet quite a bit at one time, like everyone else he knew—what else were you going to do with your day?—until he had realized that he was never going to make a fortune that way, no one could control the outcome of a horse race, and so he had decided to concentrate on something he could control.

He looked at the colours and read the names and the odds as they came up. Okay, he told himself, I'll bet you ten that Barnstormer wins at ten to one. I'll bet you ten it doesn't, he said back to himself.

It was a six-furlong race with eight runners, and after a tussle between the first, second, and third favourites, which got them into all kinds of trouble, Barnstormer came steaming through past them all and was a length clear at the post. Oh good, he said to himself, now you have a hundred and ten.

He got up when the commercial break came on and went over to check through the scope again to make sure that nothing had changed, like the blinds had been pulled down in the apartment, or a thick fog had suddenly descended. Nothing had changed. The target was still there, he was on the phone again. It was so clear that if Abbott had been a lipreader he could have told what Buryatin was saying and doing. But he didn't need to know what he was saying. And he knew what Buryatin was doing. He was costing Stubbs a lot of money.

"A lot of things I can forgive," fat Stubbs had said to him, the time he had gone back to fix the details. "But this man is costing me a lot of money, and that I can't forgive even from my own mother. Okay, perhaps my mother, but a more distant relative, forget it. This man is eating into my insides. Honest competition I can take—who can't, who's arguing, it's one of the facts of life. But this man is a wild animal, out of control. He's not one of us, also. I got nothing against them personally, understand, but the fact is they're not like us. They don't have the same values, it's not their

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fault, they just weren't brought up right, look at the place they come from, what's going on there, it's chaos. And who needs them importing their chaos here, we got all we can use and it's home-grown."

Abbott nodded. This time Stubbs was sitting at his desk with a red and white checked napkin round his neck, eating mussels. If there was one thing worse than a fat man, it was a fat man eating mussels.

"Okay, Abbott, you got something for me?"

Abbott had. He had spent a fair bit of time on this, because it was important to him. He didn't like Stubbs and he didn't want him mad and if he messed this up he didn't know what the outcome would be, so it would be as good as he could make it.

Two days before, he had walked around the district for hours, circling the Causeway, examining it from every possible direction. Then he had stood on the corner under the staggered, eccentrically-placed balconies, and looked around him. To see what he could see. The building was at the intersection of Malcolm Street and Fairbrother Boulevard. There was an office block opposite on the other side of Malcolm. But he didn't like office blocks. There was no privacy and too many people. He looked way down Fairbrother past the corner of the office block. There were more office blocks all down the far side of Fairbrother until it reached Grover Square. And on the other side of Grover Square he saw the hotel sign. He couldn't see much of the hotel, just the sign fixed to its corner and the end two windows on each of its eight floors. If he could see the hotel windows from here, from there he would be able to see the Causeway. He walked to where he was under the far end of the sixth-floor balcony. Yes, he could still see the second window in. It was long but he was used to long. He paced it out, a thin man in a tired business suit with somewhere to go and with an unusually long stride who walked in a straight line diagonally from Malcolm, waiting patiently in the street for traffic to pass him. At the corner of Grover Square under the hotel sign he made it three hundred and eighty yards. That wasn't so bad. He'd check it later a little more scientifically, but for now that was all right. That night he checked into the hotel, asking for a room on the sixth floor. The hotel was a chain at the expensive end of the spectrum, catering mainly to visiting business people and with its own restaurant. At dinnertime, he walked along to 602, the second room in, came to an agreement with the lock, and let himself in. The room was empty; there was an open briefcase on the dressing table and a two-suiter thrown carelessly on the bed. When he looked through his scope sight at the Causeway, he knew this was the place to be. He even got his first look at Buryatin, broad tanned face, nasty mouth, balding slightly. He was leaning against

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the balustrade, drinking on his balcony with two others who looked like granite gateposts, and who must be minders judging by the way one of them took Buryatin's glass to get him a refill. And behind them he had a perfect view of the whole of the lounge.

"So okay, you're set up," said Stubbs. "What do you want me to do?"

"I'd prefer us to have mobile phones," said Abbott, "I'd feel safer. I'll be too far away; there could be a mistake."

"Mobile phones," said Stubbs, "he'd prefer to have mobile phones. You know what I get every time I use one of those things? *You cannot be connected.* You talk to anyone who has one of those things, it's the same story, you're in a dead spot, or the network is busy, always some damn thing. The batteries don't last five minutes, also. Listen, Abbott, you take a mobile phone if you like, but what I'm going to take is a very large white handkerchief, and when I leave that bastard's place, I'll stand for a moment, coming out of an air-conditioned building into the heat, phew but it's hot, I'll wipe my forehead, like this, a big gesture you can't miss, right? If I do that, you blast him; if I don't, you pack up and go home and forget about it for the time being. But stay by the phone, because this man has more mischief up his sleeve, I can feel it in my water."

Abbott had tried to argue, but Stubbs wasn't having any. He had finished the bowl of mussels and he towelled his fat face with the red and white napkin.

"Abbott, I've known you for a long time, you're a good worker, and I trust you. Which is why I'm paying you more than usual for a thing of this nature. I won't say there aren't better, there are better, I could get someone from out of town, pay them twice what I'm paying you plus their travel and hotel expenses, and those people live high on the hog, let me tell you, but they don't know the town like you do, and besides, I don't want everyone in the whole damn world knowing my business. You say take a mobile phone, I'll take one. But I'll take a handkerchief also. And you watch for the handkerchief."

Abbott sat blankly in the hotel room, a thin man, getting too old for this, good at it but not the best, there were better from out of town. He sat down again to watch the television. The horses were parading for the second race.

He had a hundred and ten coming from the first race and he bet the whole lot on Marzipan, a big bay gelding, at nine to one, because he had always liked marzipan, it was the best part of a Christmas or birthday cake when he was a kid. The owner's colours were scarlet and green and that reminded him of Christmas, too.

Marzipan was the first out of the gate and led for the whole of

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the mile race, coming in three lengths ahead of the second favorite. Abbott suspected that this was a horse which had been held back in his three previous races, when he'd done nothing.

He had eleven hundred now, call it a thousand. He stared out of the window at the offices opposite, and thought about how marzipan had tasted when he was a kid.

He reached into his jacket pocket for his mobile phone, and dialled a number he had almost forgotten. The phone was picked up immediately at the other end.

He said, "Give me Freddy Garland. Tell him it's Abbott."

Freddy Garland came on.

"Well, well, well, look what the cat's dragged in. How're you, Abbott? It's been awhile."

"Yes, it's been awhile."

"Been up to anything?"

"Nothing much. This and that."

"Still working for Stubbs, that fat old bastard? Don't quote me."

"Freddy, do I still have an account there with you?"

"Wait one." Abbott heard the clicking of keys. "Just barely, you highroller, you. We clear inactive accounts after three years. You're just inside. There's not much in it."

"What's my limit?"

"Same as it always was."

"So I can bet a thousand?"

"Sure. If you want to. You're good for it. And you never know your luck."

"I'll call you in ten minutes."

He rang off, not wanting to get into all that what-you-been-up-to and what-do-you-hear-of-so-and-so, and because he didn't want Stubbs ringing him to find out if he was really on the job and getting a busy signal.

He checked his watch. Two-thirty. Stubbs had arranged his meeting for around four o'clock.

"Any meeting I have with this man, I want in broad daylight and where he lives, not some midnight rendezvous in some damn abandoned fruit warehouse. That way, it's me going to him, see what I mean, I'm the—what's the damn word?"

"Applicant," suggested Abbott, not caring.

"Whatever. I'm not going in there demanding, I'm going in crawling, snivelling to make him an offer to please get off my case, let me get some business done, and above all, stop costing me money."

In the third race, Abbott liked the look of Hello Polly, a three-year-old filly. He had also once had a favorite aunt that he called Polly, although her real name was Margaret.

He rang Freddy Garland.

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"Do you for?"

"I want a thousand on Hello Polly to win in the third race."

" 'Kay. Eleven—no, I tell a lie, it's shifted a bit, there's some money going on, ten-to-one. You've got a bet."

"Right," said Abbott.

"Nothing for three years and suddenly, hello world, I'm back."

"That's right," said Abbott and pressed End. He settled back to watch the race. Hello Polly let the others have their own way for a mile and a bit, hanging back on the outside corner of the field, and then came thundering through with a burst of speed that must have made the jockey's eyes water.

Abbott got up and stretched. He remembered this feeling now, the strength bubbling up through you, the slight dizziness, the need to laugh.

He had ten thousand he could walk away with if he wanted. That wasn't bad as a bonus. He sat on the bed, then he got up again, went into the bathroom, and had a drink of water. He went to look through the scope again. Nothing was happening. He couldn't even see Buryatin. Perhaps he'd won on Hello Polly as well and was now taking a leak to celebrate.

In the 3:10 race, a two-mile race for four-year-olds, Abbott settled on Tuesday's Child for no reason other than that he liked the name. They were giving the odds as four-to-one.

He rang Garland.

"Did you happen to know something about that filly, Abbott? Joke. Okay, you're into us for ten thousand. You want a cheque?"

"No. Put the ten on Tuesday's Child in the next race."

Garland whistled.

"It's your money. For now, that is. What are you doing, Abbott, starting a retirement fund?"

Abbott rang off quickly because Garland had suddenly given him an idea. If he won more than his pay for the job, he wouldn't make the shot. There was a bet for you. He was tired of all this, he was tired of Stubbs, tired of the long gun and the jobs he got to do. It was always the same; he needed to do something different. He was never going to get any higher with Stubbs. He'd been lucky, kept his eyesight, didn't drink enough to make him tremble, but that couldn't last forever. Ten years from now, he'd be sitting outside Stubbs's office wearing a Browning or S&W under his jacket, giving visitors the Hard Look that didn't fool anyone. And he didn't even want to think about twenty years from now.

All right. He took the bet. Tuesday's Child wins, you don't make the shot.

Tuesday's Child won after a heart-stopping duel with a thirty-to-one outsider that went to a photo. Nine-to-two. Abbott had fifty-

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five thousand. He thought, *Now I don't have to make the shot.* Then he realized that the thought was a stupid one.

If he didn't make the shot, he'd never work for Stubbs again, and worse, the word would go out that Abbott had lost it, you couldn't rely on him anymore, and so he wouldn't be working for anyone. He'd need a lot more than that fifty-five thousand.

Well, there was one way. From the horses parading for the 3:40, he picked out Hard Times, a nifty-looking grey. He knew people who never bet on greys, said it was an unlucky colour, but he liked the lines of Hard Times. He rang Garland again.

Garland was sulky, but trying to put a face on it.

"Abbott, I'm beginning to wish you'd never rung me. Don't let it go to your head, okay? What now?" So Abbott told him, feeling the emptiness in his stomach as he said the words.

"Fifty thousand on Hard Times. Give you three-to-one. All right, Abbott, but don't go making this a habit."

Abbott was pacing the room now. Okay, if this came off, he'd have enough for a long time, time to look around, take a holiday, get a tan, make some life decisions. He thought about packing up the long gun, leaving the hotel straightaway, but rejected the idea as premature. Let's see if Hard Times won first.

Hard Times won as if he were the only horse in the race.

Abbott was seriously worried now. He wished he'd never started this thing. He had begun to realize that even with two hundred thousand he wouldn't be safe. How far could he get, and for how long? Stubbs had given him some sound advice.

"I like you, Abbott," he had said. "You come here, you sit nice and quiet, you nod every once in a while, you don't interrupt, you don't insist on giving your point of view. You work good and you don't cost me money. And that's, by the way, important. In this life, to be a success you know what you need, of course you don't, you're not what I'd call an outstanding success, but I'll tell you anyway, it may help you in later years. What you need is for everybody not to cost you money. Everybody around you has to contribute to the money-making process, and if they don't contribute, some people can't, I understand that, it isn't given to everyone, this gift, at least they shouldn't cost you money. If they cost you money, you dump them. And if they cost you a *lot* of money you dump them hard and in public so that everyone should know not to go doing that. And that's why it would be good if you could pop Buryatin while he's talking on the phone causing mischief and mayhem. There's nothing like the sound of an exploding head coming down the phone to create the right atmosphere of calm and good manners."

Stubbs was vengeful. If he didn't do Buryatin, Stubbs would move heaven and earth to dump him. Stubbs had a long memory

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and a long arm and a long list of people who would be pleased to do him a favour. What good was two hundred grand? Lots of people had two hundred grand. He'd have to go back to work sometime, and Stubbs would hear about it sooner or later, and then *ba-bing.*

He was pacing now. He looked at his watch and then through the scope. Buryatin was on his feet. One of his people was showing Stubbs into the room. Abbott could even see the sweat on Stubbs's face. They were off. He had five minutes, tops. He glanced at the television. The runners and riders for the sixth race were showing. All right. Follow your instinct. He reached for the phone.

Garland was short with him this time.

"Okay, Abbott, I don't know what the hell kind of game you're running."

Abbott interrupted.

"I've got two hundred thousand, right?"

"And change."

"The whole two hundred on Shoot the Works in the sixth race. To win."

Garland sighed in exasperation.

"Shoot the Works. Can you believe this? Abbott, my advice, take the two hundred thousand and forget it. You'll never be able to bet with us again, but what the hell do you care? You know what the odds are on hitting four winners in a row. Long is what they are."

"Make the bet," Abbott told him. He didn't tell Garland about winning on the first two races.

Garland paused and then said, "I can't. I have to go upstairs for this. It's not sure they'll say yes."

"You mean they'll turn down the chance of winning back two hundred grand? Look at the price of the horse."

"I have. Fifteen to one. Longish odds. But that's not the point. This we definitely have to lay off and I'm not sure there's time. Wait," he said and went away. There was an empty sound on the phone. Abbott went over to the long gun and checked Buryatin's apartment. They were drinking. So far it looked civilised. Buryatin was talking. Stubbs was sitting sideways on the sofa listening. Okay.

Garland came back.

"You're on. But listen, Abbott, win or lose, you don't come here again, understand?"

"Right," said Abbott.

"You understand, that's not me speaking, that's a corporate decision."

Abbott rang off. Corporate decision. He could remember when Freddy Garland was just a rat-faced car thief.

He turned the television so he could see it from the window. He

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looked at the apartment again. Ah. Things were getting heated over there. The two gateposts were still standing by the door, but Buryatin was on his feet now. He looked as though he was shouting. Stubbs was sitting back, still listening. There was a dreamy smile on his face. Abbott had seen that smile before, when Stubbs let someone have their say, not listening, just quietly deciding what words he was going to use and in what order when it came to his turn.

Abbott took one of the rounds, blew gently on it, worked the bolt on the Remington, and loaded it. Ready.

On the screen, the horses were in the starting gates. Abbott spotted the yellow and purple hoops of the jockey on Shoot the Works. Third from the inside. He turned back to the Remington.

Stubbs was speaking now, not shouting, not on his feet, just sitting back speaking straight and level. Buryatin was listening, tried to interrupt, but was waved off by Stubbs, who just kept on talking, doing what he was best at.

Behind him, the race had started. Abbott turned and watched for a second or two. Shoot the Works had come out like a bullet and had gone straight into the lead, as though he knew he had Abbott's three million riding on him.

Abbott turned back reluctantly and watched the apartment. Stubbs had put his hat on, and was clearly leaving. Buryatin threw a glass at the wall, one of the gateposts ducked, but it was obviously going to miss him by a mile. Now, now, temper.

Stubbs was out of the apartment. Abbott lowered the Remington to cover the apartment entrance, then turned back to the screen. Shoot the Works was still going like a rat up a drainpipe, but now there was a large bay catching up on him and asking awkward questions. They were going into the final turn and Abbott, who sweated very little, felt a film of moisture creeping out onto his forehead. He forced himself to look through the scope again. No sign of Stubbs.

So, what the hell, he stood and watched the two horses battle it out. Shoot the Works had a lot of courage but he was too tired. His jockey was doing the best he could with a horse who had nothing left. Inch by inch, the bay edged inexorably in front until there was a neck between them. And then, quite suddenly, there was the post and it was over.

Abbott stared at the screen. He had forgotten to breathe, so he took a lungful. Then, very slowly, he turned and looked through the scope again. The entrance was empty, but he saw that Stubbs was coming down Fairbrother with his fat-man's waddle. He'd missed the signal. Had he or hadn't he wiped his forehead? Did he make the shot or not? He raised the long gun to look at Buryatin, standing now, with a telephone to his ear, talking a mile a minute.

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His two helpers were standing at the door. Abbott looked back down at the fat man. Did he look like he'd given a signal? He thought of using the phone, calling Stubbs. No, there was no time now, they were all very agitated across there, people were moving around, who knows, they could even be getting ready to leave. He'd have to make the decision himself and he hated being put in that situation. This was messy and unprofessional and it wasn't the way he liked to do things. He hadn't liked this business with the handkerchief from the start, but that was Stubbs, always had to show you who was boss and that was never, ever going to change.

Follow your instinct.

He pulled the long gun into his shoulder, curled his finger round the trigger, and made his shot.

He packed the case and was out of the room in one minute, twelve seconds, walked quickly down the emergency stairs and out into the street. He dropped his key into a waste bin together with the surgeon's gloves. Then he crossed Grover Square and headed up Fairbrother towards the Causeway.

Getting closer, he saw the small knot of people on the other side of the road. He crossed the road to gawp, as anyone would. There were only four or five of them there and they weren't hiding behind cars or each other, so evidently all they were seeing here was some man who had fallen down in the street with blood coming from his head. A couple of the more imaginative were staring up, looking for signs of loose masonry. Some quick-thinking and sensitive soul had thrown a jacket over Stubbs's upper half, which was a wise move. Abbott knew what the head would look like. He shook his head and walked on. Pretty good for downhill. He hated downhill shots.

So all right, he shouldn't have got so irritated, being put on the spot like that, having to make a snap decision, but what had really done it for him was that Stubbs had cost him two hundred thousand. A quibbler might say that if it hadn't been for Stubbs he wouldn't have won the two hundred thousand in the first place, but then neither would he have made that last stupid bet. And Stubbs was right. You can't work with someone who costs you money. You dump them.

He walked up the steps at the Causeway and into the lobby. He breathed deeply, straightened his thin shoulders, and pressed the buzzer marked Apartment 6.

There might be something for him here. Or there might not. You never knew your luck. ●

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The Trap

by Helen Tucker

The neighborhood had gone to hell without the benefit of a handbasket for transport.

That was the thought that occurred to Essie Barnett twice a week when she towed her grocery cart (which had been her husband Norvin's golf pull-cart) from her house to the grocery store and then back home.

Where once had stood stately houses with glorious flower gardens surrounded by wrought-iron or neat picket fences were now fast-food joints, a game arcade, a pawn shop, a bowling alley, and—Lord love us!—a nightclub which advertised bare-breasted waitresses.

Helen Tucker is the author of more than a dozen novels and numerous short stories for *EQMM*, *AHMM*, and other national magazines. Before she turned to fiction writing full time, she had a distinguished career as a newspaper reporter and as a writer for radio. "The Trap" involves trickery rather than violence, as do most of her stories for us. Ms. Tucker lives in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Essie had to walk past all that to get to the grocery store, which was three blocks from her house, the last Victorian structure left in the neighborhood except one. Now a bed and breakfast that took in all sorts of shady-looking people as "guests," the Solvig mansion had gone for a song to a developer. The man—she couldn't remember his name—had made several offers for her house, but she finally gave him to understand that she wasn't selling. She had been born in the house seventy-five years ago and she would die in that house, tawdry neighborhood notwithstanding. You did not let crooks and inferior people rule your life.

Her face registered a perpetual grimace each time she had to make the trip to the grocery store, and today was no exception, especially when she saw the three boys standing on the corner of "her" block. Three teenage thugs, probably sixteen or seventeen, and why weren't they in school? They were passing around a ciga-

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rette, undoubtedly a joint, and glaring at her as she crossed the street coming toward them. In faded jeans with cutout knees, dirty T-shirts, and baseball caps turned backwards, they were interchangeable as far as Essie could tell. She could have crossed to the other side of the street, then jaywalked in the middle of the block to get to her house, but she was determined not to let these hooligans change her accustomed course. Norvin had always said she was stubborn as a mule, and sometimes it paid to be.

She reached the corner and glared at them, waiting for them to move aside so she could pull the cart over the curb, but they didn't budge. They ignored her as though she were invisible.

"Excuse me," she said.

The three looked at her. "You're excused," one of them said, and they all laughed.

Manners were wasted on people who had no manners, so she said, "Get out of the way."

They stared at her as though English was not their mother tongue.

The short fuse of her temper burned out and exploded. "Move!"

"Make us," said one of the boys, while another, the one with eyes blacker than sin and black stubble on his face, said, "Bitch!"

"Then we must be related," she said sweetly, "because you're a son of a bitch." She elbowed him in the stomach, pushed him aside, pulled her cart over the curb, and started down the sidewalk. She looked back once, and the boy was flipping her the bird. She wanted to stop and send a whole aviary back at him, but she was already ashamed that she had expended one vulgarity on him, although she was aware that sometimes the only way to deal with people like that was in language they could understand. There was no doubt in her mind that if this were not a busy street, the thugs would have beat her senseless, taken her purse and groceries, and fled.

She went down the walk, pulled the cart over the two steps to the porch, and went inside her three-story Victorian citadel. She had made a stronghold out of the house, with deadbolts on every outside door, windows nailed shut on the first floor (though the fire department had warned against this), and an alarm on the back door because that was where burglars were most likely to break in. The front and sides of the house were easily visible from the street.

Before putting groceries away, she sat down on the three-legged stool in the kitchen to get her breath. Her arthritis had been bad for a long time, but now she was getting short-winded and occasionally her heart seemed to be racing. Old age stank. Norvin used to say it was better than the alternative, but how did he know? Well, he knew now: He had been in the alternative for ten years.

She pushed her white hair away from her face. The knot on top

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of her head had loosened. What did she care how she looked? Who would see her that mattered? Her friends were either dead or had moved out of the neighborhood when the area had been rezoned. Who cared if her furrowed face looked like a newly plowed field or if her vividly blue eyes had faded to pastel? She hardly ever looked in a mirror anymore. For the last few years of his life, Norvin had seemed delighted to tell her if something about her looks didn't suit him.

Norvin. Toward the end of his life, her husband had been such a negative person that she had felt more relief than grief when he died. Early on, he had gone to work for her father in the insurance business which her father had founded. When they married, they had lived in the family home, which her father had left to her. Her father had not, however, left the business to his son-in-law but to a distant cousin he had always said was a go-getter. Norvin had never been a very good salesman. The truth was, Norvin had spent the latter part of his life in the planting, cultivating, and harvesting of sour grapes.

After his death, she had let the cook go, and the yard man and a house cleaner only came when she decided to call them. She did not want people hanging around all the time. She liked the quiet, the peace and serenity of the old house.

She got off the stool and put the groceries away, saving a can of tuna to be made into a salad for her supper. Then she went into the little room that had been her father's home office, and which Norvin later called his study, but which now was her TV room. She sank into her recliner and used the remote to turn on her favorite cop show.

There was a horrendous crash. She was awake instantly, sitting up in bed, looking at the clock on the bedside table. One A.M. Had she been asleep and dreamed the crash, or had it actually happened? It had seemed so close, right next to her. But it could have been downstairs in the dining room, which was under her bedroom.

She put on her robe and slippers and went to the front window. The street outside was quiet—or as quiet as it ever was now. There were flashing neons from the nightclub and bowling alley that she could see from her window, a car passing every now and then, nothing out of the ordinary. So the crash definitely had been inside the house. Without turning on any lights, she opened the bedroom door and listened. All was quiet downstairs. And then she heard a board squeak. Ordinarily, she would have thought the house was settling, but not tonight. The face of the boy with the eyes black as sin came to mind.

As stealthily as a burglar herself, she crept down the stairs. She knew every inch of the house by heart, but an intruder would not, so she had the advantage. Then she jumped and almost screamed

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as the beam of a flashlight came from the dining room and went through the hall, followed by a figure that went to the front door, fiddled with the locks, opened the door, and left as boldly as though he were the householder. There was something that, in the darkness, appeared to be a sack on his back.

Her breath caught in her throat, otherwise she would have screamed and probably ended up dead. It was several minutes before she could move, and then she went into the dining room and turned on the light. On the hardwood floor lay her Waterford pitcher in a dozen pieces. That was the crash she had heard. On top of the buffet, where she kept her silver service, she saw immediately that the teapot, the sugar dish, and the creamer were gone. Only the large coffeepot and silver tray remained. The thief probably had meant to take it all, but had knocked the pitcher off, been scared, and left without the rest of the loot. She didn't bother to see if anything else was missing, but went to the phone in the hall and dialed 911.

It seemed an age before the police arrived, though in reality it couldn't have been more than ten or twelve minutes. There were two of them, a middle-aged man and a younger man, Sergeant Tom Sanders and Patrolman Karl Lynch.

"Tell us what happened, ma'am," the older one said after the introductions.

"I was awakened by the crash, that pitcher." She pointed to her beautiful busted Waterford on the floor. "I came downstairs and saw the burglar going out the front door with a sack on his back. Part of my silver service is in the sack, and I don't know what else." Suddenly, aware of what she had done, the danger she had put herself in by coming downstairs, her knees began to shake and she thought she was going to fall. She pulled out a chair from the table and sat down.

"Do you need a doctor?" Sergeant Sanders asked. "Are you in the house alone?"

"No, I don't need a doctor, and yes, I live here alone."

"That was risky, confronting a burglar," Officer Lynch said. "Ma'am, you shouldn't—"

"I know that," she said, feeling in her robe pocket for a handkerchief to mop the perspiration from her forehead. "The man could have killed me."

"Just one man? Could there have been more than one?"

"I only saw one . . . and it could have been a boy," she said, remembering the boys on the corner, and telling the policemen about them. "It could have been one of those. In fact, I'm pretty sure it was."

"How did he get in?"

"I haven't a notion. The windows are nailed shut, the doors are

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deadbolted, and there's an alarm on the back door."

"We'll have a look," Sergeant Sanders said. "Now don't you worry, Mrs. Barnett. Just stay calm."

Undoubtedly he had noticed that she was beginning to shake. Her mind seemed fuzzy, too. She wanted to put her head down on the table and wish reality away, find this was all a nightmare caused by her confrontation with the juvies on the corner. She watched enough cop shows to know what young people were up to these days.

The two cops probably thought she had gone plumb beyond senility, but her marbles were still on the playing field, not scattered. She simply wanted to put her head down and . . .

"There's no sign of a break-in," Officer Lynch said as the two returned to the dining room. "Everything's shut up tight, every door and window on this floor and upstairs. Who else has a key to the house?" He raised his voice as though she were deaf.

"No one."

"Servants, relatives?"

"No servants, and my only relative, a cousin, lives five hundred miles away. I have the only keys." Now she put her elbows on the table and rested her chin in her hands. She didn't realize her eyes were closed until she heard one of them say, "Ma'am, are you all right? Can we call someone for you?"

She shook her head. "I'm all right."

She opened her eyes for a moment and saw that they were putting some kind of black stuff all over her buffet and the remaining pieces of the silver service. All she could think was that it would take the devil of a time to clean up that mess.

Then one of them was shaking her shoulder. "Ma'am, are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine," she said a bit testily. Were they expecting her to be dancing a jig around the room because she had been robbed? "I'm just not used to having strangers wandering around in my house stealing my valuables. Next time . . ."

"There won't be a next time," Officer Lynch said quickly. "We'll have a car come by every ten minutes or so and if anyone is seen near your house, we'll take care of him."

"We dusted for prints," Sergeant Sanders said. "There've been some robberies in other parts of town, and we want to be sure there aren't any prints."

She wanted to ask them why they didn't clean up the mess they'd made, but she held her tongue.

"Meanwhile, you'll have to go through everything and make a list of what's missing," Sergeant Sanders continued. "We'll need it in checking pawn shops, and your insurance company will need it also."

"Yes," she said.

"Are you sure we can't call someone for you, or take you

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somewhere?" he said.

"No." Where would she go? Her only close friend now, Julia Solvig, lived in a little condo on the other side of town. She wouldn't appreciate being awakened in the middle of the night by a refugee from a robbery.

She opened her eyes again. The two cops were looking at each other as though stumped over some perplexing dilemma. "I'm all right," she insisted.

They muttered some platitudes about checking on her tomorrow and left. And then she was alone in the house and the thought that she was alone sent shivers up her spine. But surely the burglar wouldn't come back again tonight.

There was no thought of sleep now, so she got up and began to go through the dining room, checking the drawers of the buffet, the china cabinet, which held silver trays, pitchers, casserole and bonbon dishes, and then the small stand that held her flat silver. There was nothing missing except the three pieces from the silver service.

Feeling wiped out now, both mentally and physically, she went back to bed and lay there wide-eyed and listening. She had no gun, nothing to use as a weapon, but the phone was beside her bed and at the slightest noise, she would call the police again. Finally, at dawn, sheer exhaustion propelled her into sleep and she dreamed about the sinister black-eyed boy.

Somewhere a bell was ringing repeatedly. He was back! But no, he wouldn't be ringing a bell. She sat up in bed and looked at the clock. Ten A.M. And it was the doorbell. Hastily she put on her robe and went downstairs and looked through the peephole. It was that nice young patrolman, Lynch.

She opened the door. "Good morning."

"Oh!" He took a step backward. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to wake you. I just thought I'd look in to see if you were all right this morning. I'm off duty now."

"That was thoughtful of you." She smiled at him. "It took me awhile to go to sleep, so I overslept this morning."

"That's understandable. Are you okay? No bad effects from last night's experience, I hope."

"No, I'm all right. I'm in a quandary, though, as to how the burglar got in. If there's no sign of entry anywhere, and I know I locked the doors before I went to bed . . . Say, would you like to come in and have a cup of coffee?"

"Thank you. I could really use one."

She led him back to the kitchen and put the pot on the stove. It was the old-fashioned kind that percolated. "It will take a few minutes, but the coffee will be better than what comes out of those modern pots," she told him.

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"My grandmother had one of those," he said. "The coffee not only tastes better, it smells better."

"If you'll excuse me for a minute, I'll just put on some clothes." She wasn't about to sit in her kitchen in her bathrobe at ten o'clock in the morning with a strange young man. She hurried upstairs and was back shortly wearing a lavender pantsuit with a pale pink blouse.

"As I was saying," she said as she poured two cups of coffee and put the sugar dish and creamer on the table, "how do you think he got in?"

"That's a real puzzle," he said. "Tom . . . Sergeant Sanders and I covered the house thoroughly last night. I took the attic and the top floor, and he did this floor, but if you want me to, I can look again."

"I don't suppose there's any need for that. He went out the front door, so he must have come in that way. . . . But no, I remember now! I watched him from the stairs and he seemed to be fiddling with the lock on the door."

"Probably because he was unfamiliar with the location, and with only a flashlight . . . Are you sure no one else has a key? Say, someone who used to work for you in the past?"

"No, when I let the servants go, I changed all the locks. You don't think maybe the locksmith kept copies, do you?"

He smiled. "Not likely. When were the locks changed?"

"Ten years ago, after my husband died."

"You haven't lost any keys, have you, and had to have them replaced?"

"Absolutely not. If I had, I would have had the locks changed again."

He stood up. "I'd better be going. Thanks for the coffee—and listen . . ." He took a card out of his pocket and gave it to her. "If you have any more trouble, anything at all, just call this number and I'll be here in a jiffy. You can count on it."

She thanked him and went with him to the door. "You've certainly gone above and beyond the call," she told him.

She was still too restless to read or watch TV, so she did one of her least favorite household chores: dusting. When she finished, she made a pot of vegetable soup and put it in the freezer. She was still too much on edge just to sit, so she called her friend Julia Solvig, telling her about the night's excitement.

"My word, Essie!" Julia's voice went up several decibels as it always did when she was disturbed. "I've told you before and I'm telling you now: You've got to get out of that big old house. Be sensible, woman! One of these nights somebody is going to come in there and cut your throat and walk off with half the house."

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She shouldn't have called. Julia had always been an alarmist, and now she was trying to scare Essie to death.

"I've been living by myself for ten years, and last night's the first time anything has happened," she said.

"And it won't be the last," Julia came back. "You mark my words. Listen, Essie, there's a condo right above mine that'll be on the market next month. Give it some thought and move over here. It's quite pleasant. No, don't waste time thinking about it, just move out of that creepy old house."

Essie didn't like aspersions cast on her family home. It was one of the finest examples of a Victorian house anywhere around. "Yes," she said, "I'll think about it." And then she hung up before Julia could insult her domicile further.

The rest of the day passed slowly. She even had trouble focusing on the mystery movies and cop shows on TV. She was beginning to wonder if they reflected real life anyway.

She usually went upstairs at ten, but tonight she was so totally exhausted that she was in bed by nine.

It was after seven when she awoke. Her sleep had been heavy and dreamless, but for some reason the boy with the sin-black eyes was on her mind. Of the three boys, he had the meanest face and expression. He had what she would call a murderous look.

She went downstairs and ate breakfast at the kitchen table, then wandered through the dining room. She was going to have to call the insurance company to report the missing pieces of the silver service.

She stopped suddenly, aghast, in front of the buffet, staring unbelievingly. The top of the buffet was bare. The tray and large coffeepot of the silver service were gone! She blinked and kept staring. Surely her eyes were playing a trick on her. But no, they were gone. Then she looked toward the china cabinet and cried out. It, too, was as empty as a cloudless sky. Every silver pitcher, tray, and dish was gone.

Who? What? How? Her mind was in turmoil.

Could she have been sleeping so heavily that she hadn't heard someone come into the house and make off with everything she owned of value?

Obviously, that was exactly what had happened.

She felt faint, nauseated. She pulled out a chair and sat down, fanning herself with her hand.

All at once she stood up. Her flat silver! She had a ton of it. Quickly, she went to the stand and pulled out the top drawer. It was still there, the knives and forks and spoons beautifully placed on the black velvet lining of the drawer. She opened the second drawer containing serving spoons and ladles. All present. And the third drawer of odd pieces, also undisturbed. Perhaps the burglar

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had so many big pieces that he didn't bother with the small ones.

Which meant he would be back! No self-respecting burglar would leave what amounted to thousands of dollars in silver behind for long.

What had she done with the phone number that nice cop, Officer Lynch, had given her? She remembered putting it in her pantsuit pocket, so it must still be there.

She rushed upstairs, gasping for breath by the time she reached the top, ran to her closet, and reached into the pants pocket. Thank God for small mercies, the number was there. She sat on the side of her bed and punched the numbers on the bedside phone.

After four rings, he answered, sounding sleepy.

"Officer Lynch, this is Estelle Barnett. You told me to call you and . . . I've been robbed again."

The sleep left his voice instantly. "I'll be right there, Mrs. Barnett. You sit tight. Don't do anything and don't touch anything."

She went back downstairs and waited for him by the front door for almost twenty minutes.

"It happened again," she said as soon as he was inside, "and I slept right through it."

He followed her into the dining room, where she pointed to the empty cabinet and buffet top. "I suppose he didn't have room in his sack for the flat silver." She pointed to the little stand in the corner.

"Let me have a look around," he said. "Maybe this time we can find out how he got in."

He left her in the dining room and she heard him going through the house, trying windows, jiggling the doorknobs, and then he went upstairs. Soon he was back, shaking his head. "Everything is secure," he said. "He has to be coming through the front door. There is no other way. I suggest you have the lock changed immediately. Someone has a key."

"But . . ." She started to say it was impossible that anyone else could have a key, but she had been through all that with them yesterday. Though it was inexplicable, it was obvious that somehow, someway, someone had acquired a key. Or else knew how to manipulate a deadbolt. She asked about this.

"Not likely," he said. "In addition to changing the lock, it might be a good idea to put a chain on the door. A chain can be cut through, but you'd likely hear the noise."

"I should have heard last night," she said, "but I was dead to the world."

He smiled. "I'm not surprised, since you were up most of the night before. Listen, Mrs. Barnett, I'll send somebody out today to do the new lock for you and put the chain on. It might take you sev-

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eral days to get someone and I wouldn't want you to have to worry."

"Thank you for your kindness."

He patted her shoulder. "You remind me of my grandmother, and I certainly wouldn't want anything to happen to her."

After he had gone, she thought, *Grandmother!* Couldn't he have said mother? She might look ancient to him, but she didn't feel like the older sister of Methuselah.

However, she couldn't fault him for that tiny lapse, because shortly after lunch a locksmith arrived and took care of the front door, giving her two keys and a bill as he left.

She felt secure now . . . more or less. But as the afternoon shadows lengthened, she worried a little. The man, or boy, had come two nights straight. Would he come tonight? It was said that everything happened in threes.

Of course, he wouldn't be able to get in tonight. And yet . . .

By dark she was feeling very antsy. The boy with the sin-black eyes might be frustrated at not being able to get in, and set fire to the house.

Maybe it wouldn't be a bad thing to think about what Julia had said. Keeping this big house was becoming more of a chore every day. A condo in the retirement place where Julia lived might not be a bad idea.

But she loved this house, and to leave it would be like leaving her entire family, never mind that they had all left her years ago for the cemetery.

When she finally went to bed, though worn out with worry, she was slow in getting to sleep, and her sleep was light and restless. Several times she awakened and sat up in bed, listening. After all, last night someone had come in, robbed her, and left without her knowing.

It was nearly 2:20 A.M. when she heard what she thought was a squeaking board. No, please God, not again! She got up and went to the door, cracking it slightly. Peeping around the frame, she saw a figure at the foot of the stairs. She gasped, then knew that her quick intake of breath had been audible because the figure stopped for a second, then fled to the front door where he remained for another few seconds, then opened the door and was gone. If he had a sack with him this time, it was not visible.

She closed and locked her bedroom door (but what good were locks against this creature?) and went to the phone. Officer Lynch answered quickly this time. "I'll be there immediately," he promised.

And he was. In less than ten minutes the doorbell rang. Going back downstairs, she opened the door only after he identified himself.

Again he searched the house and again he came back to the

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front door. "You say you saw him going out this door?"

"Yes, and when I came down to let you in, the chain was off and the door wasn't locked."

He examined the chain. "It isn't broken. If he'd come in here, he would have had to cut through the chain, unless . . ."

"Unless what?"

"Unless he has extraordinarily small hands and could reach through the crack after he unlocked the door."

She tried to remember whether the boy on the corner had small hands, but she hadn't really noticed. He was of small stature, but it was his eyes, his mean face, that she had noticed mostly.

She headed for the dining room. "I wonder if he took the flat silver." She went to the stand and opened the drawers. All of the silver was still there. "I guess I scared him off before he had time," she said. "It's a wonder he didn't murder me and walk off with half the house."

"Maybe he doesn't know you live here alone."

"I don't count on that," she said.

"I doubt if he'll come back now that he knows you're on to him."

"Don't try to give me false courage. If changing the lock didn't keep him out, what can I do?"

"Tell you what, I'll see to it that a patrol car comes by here every five to ten minutes all night."

She wanted to say, *Fat lot of good that will do,* but she didn't want to antagonize him. The police force was her only recourse.

After he left, she got a hammer out of her tool drawer in the kitchen and took it back upstairs. She bolted her bedroom door. If he came back, he'd have to break down the door to get in, and she'd be standing behind the door with the hammer in her hand.

Although she didn't expect to, she went back to sleep and didn't awaken until the sun was shining in her face after ten o'clock.

Morning brought a new problem, at least one she hadn't thought of before. She had to do something with her flat silver. As sure as God made McIntoshes, the burglar would be back to get it. He probably had come for it last night.

She could put the silver in her bank safety-deposit box, but she was reluctant to do that. That meant every time she wanted to use it, she would have to go to the bank and lug it home, then take it back.

It came to her as she was eating lunch. The attic. It was most unlikely the burglar would ever go up to the attic, and there were dozens of places she could hide the silver there.

She put the silver in two plastic grocery bags and hauled them to the attic. At one time there had been a disappearing staircase that had to be pulled down by a small rope, but Norvin had the staircase removed and a regular stair was built, leading from the

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hall to the attic. The hole where the disappearing staircase had been was now covered by a trapdoor.

When she opened the door to the attic, she felt a slight breeze and looked at the dormer window. Good Lord! It was wide open.

Certainly she had never opened it. How could . . .

Then she knew. That was how the burglar had been getting in. She went to the window and looked down. The chimney, with graduated bricks, was a perfect ladder to the second floor. From there it was possible to climb up the eaves to the attic, enter the window, come downstairs, rob her blind, unlock the front door, and leave.

Her first thought was to close the window and nail it shut. A second thought was more intriguing. She looked at the trapdoor for a minute or two, then opened it. It was a gaping hole in the floor, and if someone fell through it . . . he would land on the hardwood floor of the upstairs hall right outside her bedroom door. But the burglar had a flashlight and would see the hole.

She opened an old trunk full of generations of souvenirs and came up with an Indian blanket that looked something like a rug. She put it over the hole. Then she went back downstairs and put her silver back in the stand in the dining room.

She couldn't sleep that night for waiting and listening. Her pulse was racing and she was sure her blood pressure had traveled skyward. But all was quiet. There was no crashing noise in the hall, no screams or moans. The burglar probably was at home asleep, worn out from his past nights of activity. She went to sleep herself at dawn and slept until noon.

Officer Lynch called her in the afternoon. "You all right, Mrs. Barnett? No burglars last night?"

"Quiet as a tomb here," she said. She was about to tell him that she had discovered how the burglar had come in, but he said, "Great, great! I'll check again later," and hung up.

That night as she was getting ready for bed, she wondered if she would have another quiet night. She was sure the burglar would be back, and fairly soon, for the flat silver.

She was not mistaken. She was in a deep sleep, but the noise would have awakened the comatose: a tremendous crash followed by unearthly screams, moans, and more screams.

Her heart in her throat, she put on her robe and opened the bedroom door. A man was on the floor, writhing and still screaming. She turned on the hall light, expecting to see the boy from the corner. Then she let out a scream herself. "Oh my God!"

The man on the floor was Officer Lynch.

A week later, Sergeant Sanders and the chief of police himself came to her house, bringing a big box containing all of the silver from the china cabinet and the silver-service tray and coffeepot.

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"Mrs. Barnett, you did what the police department has been unable to do," the chief said. "We've had our suspicions about Karl Lynch, but we couldn't come up with solid evidence. You caught him and gave us a reason to search his premises."

"How is he?" she asked.

"He has two broken legs and some internal injuries," Sergeant Sanders said. "He's going to plead guilty and will be moved to the prison hospital as soon as he's sentenced. You're not the only one he's been burglarizing. We found his garage full of everything imaginable."

"It's a pleasure to be able to return your things to you," the chief said.

Essie looked through the box. "It isn't all here. The teapot, creamer, and sugar dish of the silver service are missing. They were the first thinks he took."

"He must have pawned them," the chief said. "We'll have the pawn shops checked. There's nothing that puts the whole department in a worse light than a bad cop, so again, please accept our thanks for your part in helping us clear this up."

Essie had a warm feeling for the rest of the day. She called Julia Solvig and filled her in on the details, not even becoming annoyed when Julia said, "Estelle Barnett, you are completely out of your mind. What if he hadn't gone downstairs first but had gone in your bedroom and cut your throat?"

"Well, old friend, it's been a long time since I've had a man in my bedroom. By the way, did you hear about the woman who called the cops and said, 'I just found a man hiding under my bed and I want you to come get him first thing in the morning'?"

Still laughing, she hung up.

But that night, as she was watching her favorite cop show, she sat up suddenly in her chair, reached for the remote, and turned the set off. The scenario unfolding in her mind was more alarming than the program on TV.

Lynch had not been acquainted with her house until after the first robbery. In searching to find out how the burglar got in, he had taken the top two floors, had seen the window in the attic, and had known a good thing when he saw it. He had been the one to come the second night. Someone else had come the first time and that was why part of the silver service was still missing.

That someone else would be coming back again.

She could see those sin-black eyes as clearly as though they were right in front of her. That pinched face, the mean, glaring look . . .

Quickly, she got up, climbed the two sets of stairs to the attic, and reset the trap. ●

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Art by June Levine

MATADOR

by John F. Dobbyn

There was not a newspaper in all of Spain, from Málaga in the south to the Basque region in the north, that failed to carry the black border of mourning with the story. No death in my memory has so stung the soul of the nation. And yet, my friend, only two people on earth know what really happened. I trust you'll keep the confidence. . . .

When I was a boy, I used to endure the Boston school terms with a weather eye on the last week in June. For all of those years, that was the week when my heart, my soul, and everything in me that was capable of coming alive flew to the arms of my grandfather in Spain. We were together until the first week of school in the fall.

My grandfather was a *torero,* a bullfighter. More particularly, he was a *banderillero.* His role in the pageant of death known as the Spanish bullfight was to cross the path of a charging bull on foot and to plant the barbs—two sticks the length of a short cane—into the mass of muscle at the peak of the bull's shoulders. This prepared the bull for the work of the matador. To do this, he had to

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rise above the horns in the direct path of the bull, drive the points home, and spin to the side before being impaled. If my grandfather did this one hundred times in the course of the summer season, my heart seized with terror one hundred times. But I never once saw the hint of fear in his eyes.

Even more valuable to the matadors he served was his intuitive eye for the habits of a bull, his sense of whether it would hook with its right or left horn, charge in a straight path or veer to either side. His warnings saved many a matador the taste of the horns.

John Dobbyn's interest in bullfighting was sparked by his research into the life of Ernest Hemingway. The Pennsylvania lawyer first visited the bullring in Mexico, and later in Spain—a transition he compares to watching major after minor league baseball. The many bullfights Mr. Dobbyn attended in Spain included at least one tragic battle in which a matador was killed. He recreates the drama vividly in this new story.

He was the best, I can say with prejudice, and therefore he worked for the finest matadors in Spain. That meant that my days were filled with the company of men whose stock in trade was cheating death. To say that my heart was heavier than my suitcase at the end of the summer, when I'd board the plane for Boston and another year of Latin and algebra, would be to understate the obvious.

When I graduated from Harvard and found work as a Spanish correspondent with the *New York Times,* I was able to move permanently to Spain. More to the point, I continued my tutelage in the art and honor of the bullfight, the *corrida de toros,* year-round. Even more gloriously, I could see my grandfather perform in the service of the finest matadors in Spain without interruption.

We baked in the brilliant sun of Madrid, Valencia, Saragosa, every Sunday afternoon. My seat was immediately beside the bullring, behind the barrier where my grandfather stood while the matador performed the ritual killing of the bull. My grandfather would interpret every move of the matador for his only pupil in a low, hoarse whisper that I can hear to this day as if he were still alive.

"Watch his feet. They shuffle just when the horns pass. The crowd watches the bull, the cape. You watch his feet. He's cheating. It's calculated cowardice."

He illuminated every movement, and every movement was a clue to whether or not the matador was giving us tricks to draw our applause, or the real essence of the *corrida*—courage and honesty.

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On the twelfth of February, 1997, the curtain came down on my life. My grandfather had suffered increasing chest pains in the *corridas* of the two previous Sundays. I practically dragged him to a doctor who extracted a promise that he would cancel the next two weeks' contracts. Then, at the last minute, he was summoned to Madrid to the service of an aging Gypsy matador known as Belmonte after the master of the 1920s. My grandfather had often told me that this Gypsy's skill was such that on the rare Sundays when his courage did not desert him, he lifted the entire *corrida* to a height that brought my grandfather to tears. On the chance that this could be one of those Sundays, my grandfather took extra medication and entered the bullring.

I heard him warn Belmonte that the first bull of the afternoon would hook with the right horn, like the jab of a boxer. I could sense that Belmonte was full of his own bravado that afternoon and not likely to heed the advice of his *banderillero.* At the last moment, in the final phase, when the matador was most exposed, driving his sword over the horns for the kill, the bull struck to his right. He caught Belmonte with a horn under the ribs. My grandfather ran, waving a cape to draw the bull. The bull charged. I could see my grandfather seized with the pain in his chest. In a moment, on that Sunday afternoon, I witnessed the death of the man who had been the center of my world since my world began.

The rudder of my life was gone. I retreated to my familiar surroundings in Boston, and before long, drifted into three years of law school at Harvard.

Something of the pull of the old life must have remained, though, for without any conscious plan, I found myself taking every course in international law that was offered. After graduation, I took a position with a New York law firm that assigned me to its office in Madrid. By August, I was back on Spanish soil, listening in quiet moments to the echoes of my grandfather's whisperings, which seemed, at first, more audible than ever. I could not, however, go near a bullring, or even remain in that city of the Plaza de Toros on a Sunday afternoon.

It's funny how simply it began again. I had a close friend in law school, Julia Rafferty. She was cute—beautiful, actually, with her dark hair and constantly smiling eyes. But that wasn't the attraction. There was something that brought us together as the closest of friends, but no more. The highs and lows of law school, the random people we'd date, every thought that seemed important at the time, these were fodder for midnight discussions that occasionally saw the flush of dawn. Each of us seemed to feel without saying it that if we slipped over that line between friendship and romance, we'd kill it.

We had little contact during my first two years as an attorney.

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Then an e-mail came asking me to meet her plane at the Madrid airport. I did, and we talked until dawn as if the two years had been an hour.

She had been deeply entangled in a one-sided love affair with a well-polished skunk whom I remembered from law school. When it ended, the scars were deep and bleeding, and left her badly in need of the therapy of our old relationship. She had taken an indefinite leave from her Boston law firm and flown east.

I was able to take the vacation time for which I had previously had no use, and we immersed ourselves in every phase of Madrid life, except one. She seemed to respond, and even if it was only the superficial healing of the outside layer, more frequent smiles began to hide the diminishing pain.

It was a week after she arrived that she first raised the subject. I might have been a bit abrupt in telling her that a bullfight was out of the question. She persisted, and to my everlasting regret, I finally gave in.

Even living in my self-imposed shell, it was impossible to exist in Madrid and not be at least peripherally aware of the news of the bullring. The news that season was the rise of a competition between two young matadors in their first year as full professionals. The papers, the airwaves, the cafes—every medium of news and gossip rang with superlatives that had not been heard since the glory days of El Gallo. One would have to be embalmed not to hear that these two would "revive the waning passion of the *corrida.*" They were to appear together, *mano a mano,* at the Madrid Plaza de Toros that Sunday afternoon.

At five o'clock, we were there, the three of us—Julia and I, and the soft, clear whisperings of my grandfather, which, until then, had grown increasingly still.

I got seats halfway up into the stands where Julia could see the sweep of the ballet without too close a look at the details. She was alive with anticipation; apparently I had been more open with my feelings on the subject during our law school days than I had thought. I, on the other hand, was nearly suffocating with apprehension.

The trumpets sounded the grand march of the matadors and the assistants who make up their retinues, their *cuadrillas.* Julia was entranced by the aged pageantry and the glitter of the apparel, particularly the "suit of lights" worn by each of the matadors. As before, my grandfather focused me on the faces of the matadors. The question was always the same: How well did they hide the terror that racked every one of them, knowing how close they were about to come to death?

I was drawn, in spite of myself, to the composure on the faces of these two bronzed gladiators. They were so young. And yet there

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was that quiet Spanish pride that said to all of us, "I have the courage to stand within an inch of death. Do you?"

The crowd bathed them in hero-worship unlike anything I'd ever seen. And then suddenly it was still. The ring was cleared. The trumpet sounded, and twelve hundred pounds of power and fury thundered into the ring of clean sand. I could feel the tension that seized Julia at her first sight of a fighting bull.

To take my attention off the work of the *banderilleros,* I tried to focus on Julia's reactions. When the first extended his arms in the air to site the target of the barbs, I thought I'd need to leave. But some quiet voice told me that just as my grandfather had faced the beasts that could destroy him many times, now I had to act like his grandson and face my own demons.

The crowd rippled with excitement when the first of the matadors, a slender lad with fine, delicate features, strode into the ring. He had the refinement of one who had been to the finest polishing schools for a *torero* in Sevilla. He had taken the name of one of the legends of the *corrida* from his home city, Manuel Garcia, known as Maera.

He slowly, confidently entered the space of the bull where it stood pawing a warning into the ground. Then, quietly, classically, like Beethoven's Second Symphony, he began his passes with the cape without an unnecessary motion. He dominated the bull with a profound gentleness that seemed almost to embrace the charging animal with each pass. I was speechless. I had never seen anything so perfect. I thought I could even hear the voice of my grandfather simply sigh.

Julia was spellbound, though I knew she had no idea of what she was watching. The olé's of the crowd rose higher and higher with every graceful *verónica* until Maera finished the last pass with a flourish and turned his back on the bull.

When the time came, I tried to watch Julia's reaction to the ultimate sword thrust that would kill the bull, but I could not take my eyes off Maera. I could feel the nudge of my grandfather. "See. He holds his chest exposed to the horns interminably in order to place the sword precisely. This is one to follow."

I was as emotionally drained as Julia was exuberant about what she had witnessed. When the second bull entered the arena, my only regret was that she would inevitably be disappointed in the next performance. No one could equal what we had just seen.

I was wrong. The second of the two matadors was totally different and equally exquisite. He had the square build of the Basque, and carried himself in the flat-footed style of one who had been raised in the barrio of Salamanca. His courage was more raw than refined, but just as true as that of Maera. He, too, took the name of a great predecessor, Joselito.

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I looked through the eyes of my grandfather, and I could find no deception. With each pass, the bull brushed so close to him that the blood flowing from the wounds of the *banderillas* washed across his suit of lights. Many times I've seen matadors lean into the bull after the horns have passed to fake the same effect. He gave the crowd the genuine article, and I could see by the deep smiles in the faces of the old men by the *barrera* next to the ring that it was appreciated.

When he at last sited the bull for the kill, it was as my grandfather said it should be—and almost never is—a truthful moment when two brave combatants face each other with respect, knowing that one will die; and until the last moment, neither knows which it will be.

When Joselito walked away from the dead bull, it was clear that there could be no decision as to which matador had won the day. They were equals among the unequaled. It was also clear from the glow on Julia's face that this would not be her last bullfight.

When I had bought the tickets, I had met a member of Joselito's *cuadrilla* who recognized me from the old days. He invited me and my guest to a dinner celebration at which the two matadors would be honored. I was uncertain whether or not to accept until I saw how Julia responded to the bullfight. I now accepted.

If I could withdraw one evening from my life, that would be the one. Since that's not possible, I'll describe it.

We arrived at one of Madrid's most elegant restaurants, Los Quatros, at about nine. The maître d' escorted us to a center table set for sixteen. We were the last to arrive. We were about to take the two remaining seats at the foot of the table when my friend saw us. He took us to the head of the table and introduced us to the two young matadors, the guests of honor.

I was happy to extend my heartfelt compliments, but Julia unabashedly gushed enthusiastic praise. I could see by the broadening grins on the faces of Maera and Joselito that they were both captivated by the charm of this beautiful creature who could not stop searching for higher compliments. They had two places cleared at the head of the table beside them, and there we spent the evening.

The stories, the jokes, the music, the wine all flowed until a good part of Monday morning was consumed. As I watched Julia glide home on a carpet of the night's memories, I silently pronounced her well on the way to a cure from her Boston experience. I must say that the prognosis for me was equally encouraging. There was a call the next evening for Julia and me to join our two new friends at the theater. That was followed by a late dinner, and more sightseeing the following day. In the course of the next week,

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doors and tickets and table reservations flew open to the four of us in the names of these two national heroes.

The more of our waking hours we spent in the company of the sophisticated, self-confident Maera and the quiet, rugged Joselito, the more they seemed to want. I don't flatter myself that it was anything other than Julia's bright charm and laughter that had them both so anxious to see us. When it became clear that Julia and I were just friends, I noticed that they'd maneuver the seating at dinner, theater, and concerts so that Julia would be between them. She was the center of their focus, and she basked in it without partiality. For the time being, they were content to share her company. They limited their competition to the bullring.

As the weeks passed, Julia and I began to travel to whatever city was host to our matadors on a particular Sunday. And each Sunday, I'd enjoy watching Julia rise to a higher peak of exaltation at the wonders Maera and Joselito would work in the bullring. Whether it was that the competition between them was being constantly hyped in the press or the presence of Julia that made them work closer and closer to the horns, who knows?

Then, in July, there was a two-week period when the matadors had contracts that they had accepted at the beginning of the season to appear in different cities. Joselito went north to appear in Bilbao and the cities around the Basque region. Maera went south to Malaga and Cartagena on the Mediterranean coast. Since she had not seen the southern coast, Julia went on the tour with Maera. I did neither, since a case arose in my law firm that kept me close to Madrid.

All three arrived back in Madrid on Saturday, the first of August. The two matadors were to appear on Sunday in what was being billed as the ultimate showdown. The bulls were to be the finest and most expensive from the Miura ranch. Every newspaper in Spain had reporters in town to see if the competition would push either matador beyond the envelope of safety.

The evening they all arrived, the four of us had dinner at the small, secluded Los Cavos. We were together again, but every instinct told me that the chemistry had changed.

When the sherry was served after dinner, Julia reached over and took the hands of Joselito and myself. She looked to Maera before speaking. He smiled and shrugged, as if to say, "Why not?"

Julia pulled us together for the announcement.

"Maera and I are going to be married."

It was a moment when reactions are sudden and honest. I looked at Joselito, who had taken many stunning blows in his life. I knew him well enough to read behind the smile of congratulation a pain that went straight to the heart.

I hugged Julia and felt the ripples of excitement that animated

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her whole being. I was second to shake hands with Maera, whose smile never changed.

We used the sherry for a toast and asked the usual questions. The date had not been set—sometime after the season. They would live in Madrid. Julia supplied what answers she had, while Maera ordered more sherry. By the time we left the restaurant, we were emotionally exhausted and more than a little under the wine.

We walked home, first to the hotel where Julia and I were staying. Julia went up to her room. I started to go to mine, but decided to get a morning paper at the stand on the street. As I approached the corner, I heard the voices of Maera and Joselito. I was going to join them, but the tone of the conversation stopped me. I had never heard them argue. The wine made it difficult to grasp what they were arguing about, but I heard Julia's name, so I listened.

Slowly it crept into my consciousness. Maera had no intention of marrying Julia. It had been convenient for him to make the promise. I could hear the rage rising in Joselito's voice as he demanded that Maera marry her or be honest with her. Maera just laughed at him.

"I can't marry her, you ox. I am married."

There was a stone silence. All I could hear were Joselito's heavy footsteps walking away.

I went to bed, but there was no sleep. I kept seeing Julia a month earlier, when she was so close to a breakdown that I was afraid to leave her alone. The thin layer of scar tissue was still fresh. I had no idea how I could guide her through the disaster that lay ahead of her. I only knew that there was nothing I could do until after the *corrida.*

Every seat was filled half an hour before five o'clock. Excitement ran through the crowd like static electricity. We had seats next to the *barrera* directly behind the matadors' position. Julia looked exhausted from the night before, but she was running on the joy of a prospective bride.

The matadors' entrance march brought an ovation that was off the scale. When they came to the *barrera* to await the first bull, Maera was full of the glow of adulation. He bowed low before Julia. She beamed, and my heart nearly seized. Joselito stood stiffly with his back to us.

The moment was broken by the blare of the trumpet and the entry of the first bull into the arena. It had the sleek coat and well-rounded muscles of an adult fighting bull in its prime. It pawed the sands, searching the arena for a target for its rage.

Maera had drawn this bull by lot the previous day. He took the large cape from the *barrera,* shook it out, and strode to the center

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of the bullring. He planted his feet together and spread the cape with two hands in the perfect form of the *verónica.*

The bull snorted, squared to the matador, and answered the summoning challenge of the rippled cape. His charge was straight and true. As he picked up momentum, I focused, as always, on the feet and legs of the matador. Then I heard the coarse voice of my grandfather, which by now I could scarcely discern from my own. "Not the man. Watch the bull! Watch the bull!"

I flashed to the lowered horns of the charging beast. I saw the cape move slowly, gracefully to guide the points of death past the exposed body. I grabbed Julia in my arms when I realized that for the first time in my experience, the bull would not follow the cape. I hid her face as the points drove through the delicate skin of Maera and pierced to the heart. The bull raised his powerful neck and threw Maera to the ground like a pitchfork throwing a slab of hay. When he landed, I knew to a certainty that Maera's life was gone.

Julia pulled away to see what had happened to the man she was about to marry. She screamed, pleading with someone to help him. I held her as tightly as I could until she realized that there was no help for him. I could feel her body wilt into sobs.

When he was carried out of the arena, she wanted to go to him. I knew what the sight would be, and I convinced her to stay in my arms.

I looked down at Joselito. He was standing in front of us, grasping the wooden barrier inside of the ring for support. His eyes were wet when they fixed on Julia. His body seemed to shake uncontrollably.

I was numb with shock and confusion. How could the bull lose sight of the cape, especially in the hands of a matador like Maera?

My eyes locked with those of Joselito, and something else caught my eye. On his right side, there was a growing line of crimson penetrating the silk of his pants. It grew wider and spread to his back. As he looked up at us, I realized that he had somehow reopened a fresh, bleeding wound.

I had seen that wound so many times before on other matadors, but in my benumbed state, it took what seemed forever to see the truth. It came together in one searing flash.

I looked back into his eyes, which seemed to be pleading for something. I said in a low tone that I'm sure he heard and understood.

"Yo sé. Yo sé." I know. I know.

His eyes were fixed with mine. Through the mist that coated them, I read a confusion of emotions, but one of them, I was sure, was relief. Another human being shared his secret.

The arena had been cleared, and the second Miura bull was now

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pawing the sand, demanding a confrontation. Joselito was oblivious to the streams of moisture flowing from his eyes, and the crimson stain that clearly needed attention. He bowed to us and took the cape.

He made the sign of the cross and walked into the center of the arena. His pace was slow, but his bearing was straight and strong. The crowd was still muted from the shock of the death of Maera, but the volume slowly rose in support of its second hero.

Joselito took his position in front of the bull. He spread the cape with two hands. He drew the bull as had every matador from the first I had seen as a child. He rippled the flowing red cape and gave a low, guttural, *"Hah, Toro."*

The bull charged as true as would be expected of his breed. I watched the matador. Joselito's feet and legs never quivered. He was a statue, until the points of the horns were within ten feet. I watched for the graceful sway of the cape that would lead the bull to his right side. It never came. At the last moment, he lowered the cape and exposed his body to the bull.

A month has gone by since that Sunday afternoon in Madrid. I brought Julia home to America and decided to stay for some time myself. The firm has work for me on this side of the ocean for a while.

I thought I could keep it all inside, but I know now I have to tell someone for my own mental health. What every newspaper and every *aficionado* in Spain is mourning is simply the death of two of its greatest heroes of the bullring. It was, in fact, a murder and a suicide.

I realized that afternoon when I had a moment to think about it that there is only one reason a bull charges the man and not the cape—he has faced a man with a cape before, and he has learned from the experience. When I saw the freshly opened wound on Joselito's hip that afternoon, a wound that I had seen so many times on other matadors, I knew that he had been working with a bull no more than a day earlier.

I confirmed with Joselito's doctor in Madrid, under an oath of silence, that Joselito had come to him the morning of the last *corrida* with a wound that needed stitching. Joselito had gone to the pen where the fighting bulls are kept behind the *Plaza de Toros*. He isolated the bull that had been drawn by lot for Maera and worked him with the cape until he learned to charge the man and not the cape.

That's the truth, my friend. I feel the burden lightened for having told someone. On the other hand, all of Spain is mourning the honorable deaths in the *corrida* of two great matadors. Julia mourns the same. Both Spain and Julia will recover from that mourning. I see no reason to say more. Do you? ●

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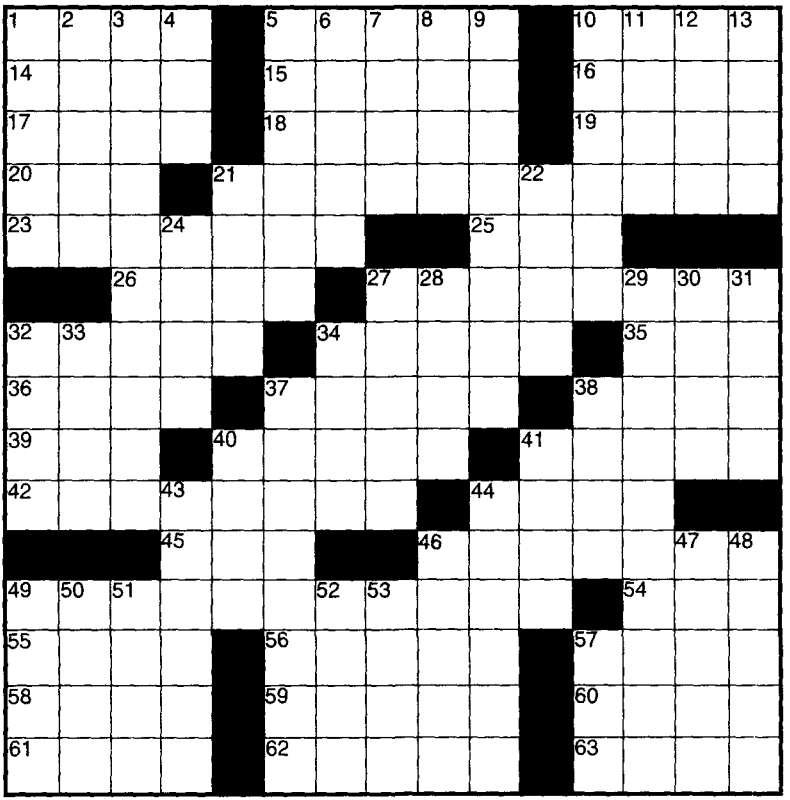
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

Trivia

by Ruth Minary



Solution on page 141

ACROSS

1. Family of Mel, the first to hit 500 home runs in the N.L.
5. Talked wildly
10. ____ *Me Deadly,* Mickey Spillane
14. Section of London
15. Student in Strasbourg
16. Tennis's Nastase
17. Once more
18. Black ____, police vehicle
19. Unaspirated consonant
20. Gear
21. Author of "Harmless Obsessions" (Mar. '02)
23. Conclude
25. Maigret's grain
26. Rival for *Vogue*

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27. Measurements from side to side
32. Kind of range
34. La Scala city
35. Hasten
36. Picnic pests
37. Author LaPierre
38. Ancient Persian
39. Altar words
40. T-shirt size
41. *Buck* ____, Joyce Burditt
42. Open disobedience
44. Indonesian island
45. Never in Nuremberg
46. Ancient district in southern Italy
49. "Computer Seance," by ____ (Apr. '01)
54. Warning from Asta
55. Pelvic bones
56. Carleton ____, radio voice for Ellery Queen
57. P.D.'s sleuth
58. Willowy
59. Patrol, Fr.
60. Mr. ____, detective role for Peter Lorre in '40s films
61. Begin play
62. Virgil's hero
63. Part of D.A.R.

DOWN

1. Third largest Japanese city
2. Restorative
3. "____ the Wedding Doves," Edward D. Hoch (Feb. '02)
4. Farm female
5. Eliminate
6. "No palaces his heart rejoice;/ A cottage in ____," A.D. Godley, "After Horace"
7. Aloe ____
8. *Hear No* ____, Bethany Campbell
9. P.I. Kate Brannigan mystery by Val McDermid
10. *Come and Be* ____, Elizabeth Ferrars
11. French islands
12. Chinese, comb. form
13. *Last* ____ *Wearing,* Colin Dexter
21. Antonym of stet
22. Pearl Buck's heroine in *The Good Earth*
24. Woes
27. Carousal
28. U. Grant's opponent
29. "Into ____ of Memory," Batya Swift Yasgur (May '01)
30. ____ *and Seek,* James Patterson
31. *The Bad* ____, William March
32. Surprise attack
33. Thereafter, for Falco
34. Cleo's lover
37. Governess for the ward of the mysterious Mr. Rochester
38. Mail in Madrid
40. Hideaway
41. Salt
43. Breathe in
44. Protrusions
46. ____ hand, help
47. Furious
48. Shield
49. Sneaky Pie's owner
50. ____ Bator
51. List
52. *The Last Camel Died at* ____, Elizabeth Peters
53. Mound of sand
57. Kay Scarpetta's org.

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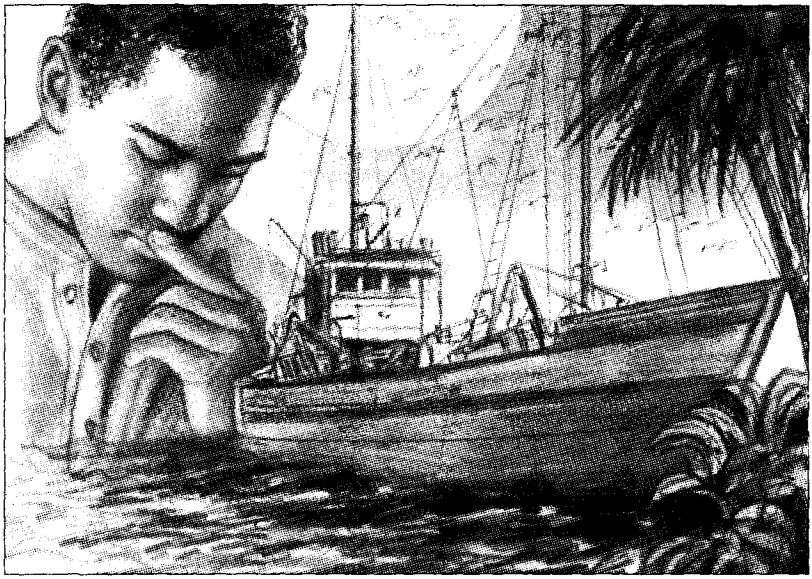

Art by John Stevens

A Well Excavated Grave

by Frances Joyce

The hand, as a hand, was not particularly extraordinary. It was a well-shaped hand, but it wouldn't have drawn anybody's attention except for the fact that it had no body attached to it. Mind you, it didn't have the correct complement of fingers, either. Perhaps it had shaken hands with a thief recently. Or maybe an ugly customer with sickle mouth and sandpaper skin had made a morsel of them. The hand lay on the wharf of the Kalk Bay harbour. Next to it lay a shark. The shark was no Al Capone of the ocean, but only a modest-sized gangster who had worked the seal racket in False Bay. My skipper, Nuredien, weathered, bristly face under woollen cap, had emptied its stomach contents and brought the hand to light. Now there arose a shocked murmur from the small group of people assembled on the wharf to see the fishing boats come in. The hawkers at the stone fish-

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tables, who had been raising their cries "Silver, silver here," "Ka . . . bel . . . djou, three rand," "Sê nou," one by one fell silent. You could hear the lapping of the milky green water. A seagull settled on the forecastle of the boat and chuckled derisively.

I looked at the hand, risen out of the dark depths of the underworld. It seemed to beckon me to put a name to it and make some retribution for its fate. The corpse that belonged to the hand was somewhere else: lulled by the tides on a sandy bed, coasting and bobbing like a sodden buoy among the rollers, or torn into a thousand pieces by frenzied scavengers of the sea. A poet's words came suddenly to mind: "the sea has nothing to give but a well excavated grave."

A pseudonymous South African short story writer, Frances Joyce is also a published poet, and even her prose is full of poetic imagery. She has devised a classical whodunit for us this time, and it is one with an unusual scene-of-the-crime. Her use of South African slang is spare enough that we think readers will be able, for the most part, to grasp the meaning from context. ¶

My name is Berenice De Montfort. I used to be on the staff of a newspaper, but when a small legacy came my way I invested it in a fishing boat that harvests the Cape Peninsula waters, bringing back stumpnose, yellowtail, snoek, elf, and the like. It's a modest outdoor living and leaves me time for other occupations, like mountain climbing. Or meddling with murder.

I sent little Achmat trotting importantly in his yellow oilskin overalls to the harbour master's office to call the police. Then I put the matter temporarily out of mind and it was just another Wednesday noontide as Nuredien and I supervised the baling out of milk crates of trussed bunches of black-eyed mackerel, briny-smelling and glistening.

Friday morning the *Cappuccina* rocked lightly in the glassy swell, hitched to a bollard on the jetty, while the crew attended desultorily to some repairs. And I had leisure to feel some curiosity about the bizarre catch we had brought up two days before. When I was on the paper I'd made some contacts with the police, so I was able to phone Inspector Petrus Cupido and ask him what progress they'd made in tracing the owner of the dismembered hand.

"No bodies have washed up on the False Bay coast in the last few days," he said. "No sightings at sea. Probably the remains are moving through the ecosystem via the maws of the marine life.

"We passed the piece that your shark took on to our Fingerprints

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Department in the Criminal Records Centre. The prints were too badly disintegrated to be identified, but they sent scrapings from under the fingernail crescents to our Biology Unit in Pretoria. Word came in this morning that the scrapings were mostly white flour. The flour must've been quite densely packed to survive immersion. The theory at the moment is that the deceased was a man, perhaps a chef on one of the liners, who got washed overboard. But just in case he was a murder victim, we've asked the newspapers to give us a fortnight before they print a story."

I thanked him and said I thought I might help by making a few enquiries myself.

"Why not?" he said. "You've already started by giving us a hand." When he cut the connection he was still chortling.

I leaned back in my chair in my cottage in Kalk Bay and considered.

The most promising lead seemed to be the flour under the nails. The police were going for the most likely angle, but there was just a possibility that the body had belonged to a shoreman. Leaving aside the bizarre possibility that the deceased had been a secret flour fetishist, then the obvious locales to investigate were bakeries, flour retailers, wholesalers, and millers. I decided to begin with the bakeries. Perhaps someone had been unable to stave off death even with the staff of life. I drew the phone nearer. An hour and a callus on my forefinger later, I had learnt that no one had cast their breadmaker on the waters. I turned my attention to the large flour companies that milled, stored, and sold flour. My third enquiry about missing staff evoked a hesitant, hedging response. They didn't give out that kind of information over the phone, the personnel manager said. I said I would be dropping by.

The Snowwhite Flour Company had found itself a spot in Salt River simultaneously on the margins of industrial, commercial, and residential areas, and had burrowed in under a freeway and next to a railway line. Beyond the barred security gate and guard lay the office block. Further to the right stood two groups of grey silos: massive round towers and a formidable six-storey block with small windows. The large mill building abutted the silos and was fronted by a shunting area stacked with packages of flour.

I parked my bakkie near a couple of very smart wheels and tried to believe that fish scales were an adequate substitute for fishtails and sheepskin seat covers for tanned leather upholstery. After a brief parley at the reception, I was shown into the personnel office. If names are destiny, then the silvery-haired personnel manager, Mr. Jolyon Snowman, could only have ended up in a flour mill or a soft-serve gelateria.

"I'm doing some research," I explained, combining truth and misdirection, "compiling profiles of people who drop out of work or

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go missing." No point in spreading dismay and despondency with lurid hints that the missing person sought had already been found and harvested by the grim reaper.

Snowman summed me up and seemed to find me a creditworthy balance.

"One of our chaps from the packing department hasn't clocked in since Monday. That makes four days now. 'Course he may simply have taken time off for a refresher course in hanepoort bibbing." His eyes twinkled. "Now what's his name? Begins with an 'S'."

"Samuels."

The contribution came from a man working quietly nearby. He was middle-aged and had that combination of dark hair and pale eyes that South African genes quite often produce. His right eyebrow grew in a more acute angle than his left, which gave the two sides of his face slightly different expressions.

"Yes. And he hasn't phoned in any excuse that I'm aware of."

Did they have a record of his home address? Snowman consulted a computer terminal and produced one. The street in Retreat was unknown to me.

"No sweat," Snowman said. "Lend the lady your map, Wim."

I thanked them, promising to return the ring-bound street guide shortly.

Following the map, I found the Samuelses' Retreat home at the end of a little cul-de-sac. It turned its back on the Cape Town to Simonstown railway line, but couldn't stop its ears to the daylong rap and natter of the trains. The thick Port Jackson bush of the sandy Cape Flats, a refuge for the desperate, nudged two sides of the yard. Parked in the driveway was a pristine new city golf. It seemed to be withdrawing its crisp treads slightly from the cracked concrete driveway.

A Mrs. Samuels, Phil's mother, was at home. The ancient Greeks, who felt you could never make a good thing too conspicuous, used to paint their over-life-size statues with bright colours. Mrs. Samuels, on the same principle, clothed her buxom frame in a dress printed with enormous bright red flowers.

She showed me into a small sitting room. The living room suite was of the mass-produced, poor-quality, callow type that is all the poor can contrive of reach-me-down smartness. One of the chairs was still covered with dusty plastic and had a shop label attached to it.

When I said I wanted to speak to her son, her eyes widened as she stared at me.

"Phil? No, that's not possible. He died on Monday."

She turned away from me and dabbed at her nose with a tissue.

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"Yers. He was coming home from work. He was crossing the main road, there by the supermarket. An' he jus' step into the road an' he didn' see the truck coming or nothing. My only child, you know. An' I had to get a death certificate an' everything. The minister at the funeral there by Mutual Cemetery said it is an Act of Providence."

I expressed my sympathy for her bereavement and left her dabbing at her eyes with a tissue. I hoped it wasn't the same one.

I started the bakkie and drove a few yards down the road. Then I cut the engine and sat thinking about my next step. After a couple of minutes the door of the house opposite opened and a woman came out carrying a conversational gambit and pretending it was a black plastic garbage sack. Life and the years had shrivelled her body and her horizons, thinned her hair and patience, and sharpened her eyes and malice.

"You looking for someone?"

"Was. Phil Samuels. But I understand he's deceased."

She looked at me with an unreadable expression. "I can show you a photograph of him."

"All right."

"This is him," she said, returning with a snap. "With my grandson. *That woman,"* she went on, and her face curdled, "didn't want her son to be friends with my grandson. Says he's a gangster. You'd think syrup wouldn't make fingers sticky."

I studied the snap. The grandson was a nice-looking youngster, but nothing to compare with Phil Samuels, who was handsome with velvety-soft dark eyes that must have lured all the girls.

The old bat snatched the snap back and turned away.

"You take a trip down the Heerengracht," was her parting shot, "if you want to learn how *that woman*'s behind her son's death."

I took the freeway back to the city centre Foreshore. Either the insinuation was baseless spite or Mrs. Samuels had lied to me. Clearly I couldn't dismiss the possibility that the hand from the sea had belonged to Phil Samuels. I wondered whether my informer's grandson hung out on the Heerengracht and knew something about his chommie's death.

The Foreshore was a piece of land that had been reclaimed from the sea. The Heerengracht was the main road of the Foreshore and had once been a canalized river. Now an upstream and downstream of vehicles flowed along each side of the sidewalk banks and whirlpooled around the traffic island with its fountains and seagulls. It was a busy Friday afternoon, and I couldn't keep an eye open for the grandson without running the risk of having both eyes closed forever in a traffic pileup, so I stashed the bakkie in a parking garage and set out on foot. The pavements were lined with vendors displaying their wares, mostly curios: African masks,

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wooden bowls, carved animals, beadwork. Many vendors led a precarious and impoverished existence, cold-shouldered onto the fringes of the economy, trying to scrape a living off the stony sidewalk.

I was repassing a section of the Gracht I'd already covered once when I spotted him. He was joint proprietor of a vendor's tray with an eclectic line in socks, cigarettes, hair-grips, and nuts. His business partner seemed to have been chosen for decorative rather than commercial reasons. I watched him from a distance for a couple of minutes, meditating with some admiration on Mrs. Samuels's thespian talents. Then I went over, warily, in case he drew a gun on me.

"Mr. Phil Samuels?"

"Yis?"

"Late of Mutual Cemetery?" But he didn't look like the walking undead to me.

He stared at me. "Is this a joke?"

So he wasn't in on the scam.

"Why haven't you been to work at the mill?"

"Oh, that. No, I've chucked that job. One of the other guys in Packaging had it in for me. Any old excuse. Like Monday, he went and reported me to the supervisor. Some story about finding a bit of string in the flour. Then the supervisor blasts me for not cleaning the storage bins last Friday. I told him, 'Yis, I did clean those bins.' Anyway, now I've got my own business, with my girl Faldiela."

"He's living with me," she boasted, sliding an arm round his shoulders. Those eyes, I thought.

"Did you fill your mom in on events, Phil?"

"Ma knows, yis. I told her when I came home on Monday, and I moved out the next morning. Ma thought it was a good plan."

"She's taken out an insurance policy on your life, hasn't she?"

"How'd you guess?"

"Well, your mom thought it such a good plan, you leaving home, that the minute you moved out she bought a fake death certificate from some smart operators and made a claim on your policy. The money can't have come through yet, but on her expectations she's ordered a car and a lounge suite."

The girl's eyes widened and she clapped a hand over her mouth.

"But I went home for dinner last night," Samuels objected, "and Ma told me she won the money in a TV game show."

"Believe me, she's giving out you're just another road accident statistic."

While he digested this, I tied up a loose end.

"Last night, did you have words with an old lady down the road?"

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"Mrs. Appollis? I ran into her, yis, said, 'Howzit,' and so on." But he was following his own train of thought. "What about Ma? Are you going to report her? Will she go to jail?"

I shrugged. "To her it was just innocent fun. The insurance companies are spoilsports: They call it fraud. Luckily, she can't have been paid out yet and she can return the goods she's bought."

He pondered. "Maybe she could say she made a mistake in identifying my body."

"I think your ma should've ordered some nice things for you, too, Phil," the girl said sulkily. "After all, it was your funeral."

"Now, wait a bit . . ."

I left them to it. The lead had petered out. I considered returning the map to the mill, but it was already knockoff time. I decided to chaila myself.

In the dawn hours of Saturday morning, just off Sunrise Beach at Muizenberg, a solid wall of yellowtail headed on inscrutable fishy business tangled with our treknets and the boat returned to harbour, a hold full of succulence weighing her down in the water. No sharks and no surprises.

I had an invite from Henri to look in that afternoon. Henri, hard, lean, weatherbeaten, with tousled hair and bushy eyebrows frowning over eyes screwed up from an habitual scanning of bleak horizons, had been a member of a South Polar expedition. Henri brought a quality of intrepidity and daring even to his softer moments, and I liked it that way. At present, he was living on Woodbridge Island, which meant I would have to drive across the neck of the peninsula from the Indian to the Atlantic Ocean. If Jolyon Snowman lived somewhere along my route, I could drop off the map. The telephone directory listed him in Brackenfell, which was way out of my way. Not so Wim Osmens's address, which was inscribed on the inside cover.

Number six, Railway Street, Maitland was a nondescript, single-storey brick house with a pointed roof and a front stoop, a garage and a shed. It was surrounded by a yard with a desiccated lawn and an unweeded flowerbed containing a few perfunctory snapdragons, whose days of snapping seemed to be long past. Dozens of almost identical petite bourgeoisie dwellings dotted the peninsula. This one gave the impression of having passed through many transient, uncaring, anonymous hands.

The woman who answered the door had coarse, porcine features: chubby cheeks, an upturned snout, and small, knowing eyes. Her hair was yella-by-Wella, and she had a good figure. Her husband was out, she told me. With great reluctance, she allowed me to enter the hallway and pass into the lounge.

"You must please excuse the state things are in," she said, irrita-

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bly plumping up a sofa cushion. "We moved down here from Gauteng only three months ago and everything's in crisis and upside down at the moment."

"Your husband lent me this map, and I was passing this way so . . . "

She thanked me distractedly.

On the way out my eye was caught by a framed wedding photo of a young couple, which stood on an occasional table. In the young woman I recognised a fresher, more vibrant version of Mrs. Osmens; the young man was Wim Osmens, his eyebrow on the right side of the photo quirked in a more acute angle than the left. Mrs. Osmens followed my gaze.

"How long you been married?" I asked idly.

"Eighteen years."

Glancing at her, I saw that the pupils of her eyes had dilated so that her eyes seemed almost black. She was still very much in love with him, I observed in some surprise. I drove off thoughtfully. I liked men. I had found them good companions when I worked on the paper. In the past years there had been men I had loved and a few men I'd quite frankly enjoyed, but I'd never experienced a blinding passion. Moderation was my middle name.

Perhaps Henri would change all that.

Back home Sunday evening I was idly whirlpooling a pot of bouillabaisse with a wooden spoon and wondering whether a great deal of mountaineering and a smattering of martial arts experience were suitable qualifications for joining the mooted South Polar expedition next year. Maybe so. If anyone was wanted to scale an ice escarpment and put an armlock on a penguin, I was just the girl to do it. While I was thinking about running up and down the steep-gradient streets above the harbour to get in training, the photograph of Wim Osmens that I'd seen the day before suddenly flashed in front of my mind's eye. During the interval with Henri when the soft violins were playing, some busybody department in my mind had taken the photo image, aged it by eighteen years, and matched it with my memory image of the man I'd seen in the personnel department at the mill. Then it had narrowed its eyes and flung the photo image right back into consciousness with an attached memo that read: "Think again, dummy."

I thought again. Yes, there was something odd there, something faintly different, even allowing for the ravages of the years, but I couldn't isolate the factor. I thought I would try a wild shot, and I phoned Inspector Cupido. He was off-duty, so I left a message.

Monday I phoned again and he had some information for me. The computer in the Criminal Records Centre had retrieved a couple of references to a Wim Osmens. There had been a robbery in a

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company in Kwa Zulu Natal five years back and one in Gauteng two years ago. The police had interviewed those workers who had inside knowledge relating to the stolen valuables and who might have had the ability and opportunity to commit the theft. Both times Osmens was among them. In the Gauteng affair, the police had managed to lift up a smudged fingerprint from the plundered safe that seemed identical to Wim Osmens's prints. They had his prints on record from some years back when he'd applied for a licence. But Osmens, as a personnel clerk, had had bona-fide reasons for leaving prints around the place. And in both cases he could conclusively prove, with witnesses, that he had been weekending in another town at the time of the robbery.

Where had I run into Osmens? the inspector wanted to know. I told him he was working at the Snowwhite Flour Company. No, I didn't have any evidence of anything criminal. It was just something that was a bit odd and I would keep in touch. And had the police found the owner of the hand that the finned bodysnatcher had gulped? They were pursuing enquiries, he said sagely.

I seemed to have got sidetracked in my own enquiries, but the Osmens enigma puzzled me and I couldn't let it rest. I thought that at this point I needed some background information, so I phoned the Internal Revenue Department in Johannesburg. I asked a guy there that owed me one to dig up anyone with the uncommon surname Osmens. I didn't want any privileged financial information, only the personal particulars that might relate to Wim Osmens.

He rang back with the names and details of four Osmenses. Wim Osmens, born 9 September 1957; profession: personnel administrator; spouse: Marie née Jackson, born 2 November 1962, housewife. Elizabeth Osmens, born 21 November 1935, pensioner. Vossler Osmens, born 9 September 1957, listing a variety of professions, among them tour guide, housepainter, and supervisor. Before he rang off, he told me the local Mountain Club was planning a trip to the Drakensberg over the next long weekend. I said I thought I might be able to swing it.

There was one point of interest here that seized my attention: Wim and Vossler Osmens listed exactly the same date of birth. They were almost certainly twin brothers. The pensioner, Elizabeth, might or might not be their mother; I did not think the question important.

Twins! I refreshed my memory from a reference book on my bookshelf. Twins, I read, might have no more than an ordinary family resemblance to each other, but identical twins had the same appearance, genetics, and blood group, and similar fingerprints.

I paused in my reading to fit the pieces of information together.

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The twin brothers, with Wim's wife Marie, appeared to be making a nice little family business out of brigandage. Wim would take up a post in the personnel department of a likely firm, gather inside information on the target, and, slipping unseen into the premises over a weekend, would heist the valuables. Vossler, joining them shortly before the hit and staying at home unseen indoors, would provide an alibi by making sure he was seen by witnesses a secure distance away at the time of the robbery. If Wim was accidentally spotted by security, he would have a plausible excuse for being at work and he would abandon the robbery attempt for the time being, the alibi then being worse than useless. The Snowwhite Flour Company was their latest target, and Vossler might have already joined them and be hiding out in the house in Maitland, where they would not be welcoming any visitors.

Returning to the article, I panned through some irrelevant stuff and then stuck fast at a qualification to a previous passage. The identical appearance of twins sometimes varied slightly, the writer noted, the right side of one resembling the left side of the other. In a flash I realised that this was the factor that I hadn't been able to pinpoint. The Wim Osmens I had met had a more acutely-shaped eyebrow on the right side of his face. The Wim Osmens in the wedding photo had a similar eyebrow on the right side of the photograph, *which meant it was on the left side of his face.* The Osmens I had met was not Marie's husband; it was his twin brother Vossler, posing as Wim. Marie must be an accomplice in the deception. Where, then, was Wim, her husband? Was he hiding out in the house ready to provide an alibi for his bolder brother, who had assumed his identity and would carry out the theft?

There was a more macabre possibility. I had started out searching for a missing man and now, in following up what I thought had been a red herring, I might have found one. Had thieves fallen out and one been murdered? Was the shed next to the Osmenses' garage a boathouse? Did the hand from the sea belong to Wim Osmens?

Tuesday morning and I was waiting for security to open the barred sliding gate to the mill, reading a notice on the wall that admonished "Big Brother Is Watching You." But man bent on mischief or mayhem will always find a way. Even Cain found he could evade surveillance for just sufficient time in which to stiff an insufferable brother. I had opted for a personal confrontation with Osmens because although I could prove they were twins, the case against the three for robbery was only a strong hypothesis. And only some sea-wrinkled fingers of suspicion raised the spectre of a darker crime. This way I hoped to prod him into some damning confession.

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Osmens was not in the office. Snowman said he thought he was at the silo and he'd send someone to fetch him, but I said, thanks, I would go myself. I crossed the shunting yard to the ponderous massivity of the square silo. The entrance was round the back, on the blind side of the security post. The back fencing was spiked but was not unscalable.

I stepped through the door of the silo into a great visceral throb and roar of sound, a growl of powerful systems of machinery at work. In the Romantic Age someone once defined the sublime as a sense of the great power of nature, which produces a feeling of awe and fear in vulnerable man. Now Industrialism was rewriting the sublime in terms of the awe-inspiring machinery of technology. The space on each floor was filled with a jungle of cream-colored tubes, funnels, ducts, flues, and cylinders, like strange metal plants sending their shoots everywhere. Mostly they grew horizontally or at angles at body or head height or above, but in isolated patches were clusters of upright pipes that resembled curious rigid forests. Unseen flower blooms scented the warm air with a faint perfume or dropped fine siftings of white pollen to the shoulders of one brushing past their stems.

I took a small lift with a concertina gate to the fourth level. Past a small room with a computer console, I found Osmens and a man in white tunic and trousers standing near a flour bin. The vast bin was sunk below floor level. The metal manhole cover had been thrust to one side and the square opening gaped blackly. Osmens was pointing at a strange contraption near the hole. It was a wooden swing chair, suspended by a hawser from a rod, like a sinker from a fishing rod. The thick metal rod was set into a wheeled base with a hawser drum and a crank handle to winch out the line.

Osmens pointed at the flour bin and shouted something. The man in the tunic mouthed back words. Above the din I thought I could distinguish the words "Cleaned last week." Osmens spoke emphatically. The man in the tunic nodded, moved off, and disappeared out of sight.

Osmens looked round and saw me. Something hurtled up from the depths of his mind and bobbed against the pale portholes of his eyes. But the next moment, the curtains were drawn across the portholes and he smiled at me and shouted something in which I distinguished the words "thanks" and "map." I was close to him now, and I peered down into the dark depths of the bin without being able to distinguish the white contours of the flour.

"Did you return the map to your brother Wim?" I asked absently.

I could barely hear the words myself, but even the half-heard loud-hails to guilt.

Perhaps the chair made a noise as it moved, but the rumble of

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machinery drowned it out. It struck my back, batting me over the floor towards the bin that gaped like a grave. I was off balance, unable to get my centre of gravity back sufficiently to stop being propelled forward. At the last moment, my judo training stood me in good stead and I twisted sideways, hitting the boards just beyond the abyss of that bottomless pit, rolling and slamming into a pipe that coiled its way from floor to ceiling.

I scrambled up. Osmens had disappeared. I bolted to the lift. It was already moving upwards. I couldn't believe he'd chosen to go up. Someone on the floor above must have pressed the Up button just as Osmens had closed the lift door. I spent some time quartering the floor for stairs before I found them. They were single-file open treads in a steep gradient. I was used to perpendicular rock faces and swept up them with a slight sneer. The fifth floor was deserted. I raced up to the top floor. The lift had stopped on that level. The man in white clothing, to whom Osmens had been giving orders, was standing holding the lift door open. The expression on his face combined a slow surprise with speculation. Seeing me cast my eyes around, he pointed to a corner of the silo deck and a metal fire escape with a trapdoor that had to open onto the roof. I raced up the metal treads and forearmed the trapdoor. It was immovable.

Settling down for a siege, I called Inspector Cupido on my cellular phone and brought him up to date. He said he would send reinforcements and to stay put. I sent the man in white, a fascinated audience, downstairs with instructions to lock the silo door from the outside and keep everyone out until the police arrived.

After ten minutes, I began to feel I had exhausted the possibilities of staying put. I went over to one of the small windows, seesawed the pane open, and looked out and up at the roof parapet a couple of metres above me. Anticlimax: Osmens wasn't looking out and down. I crossed over to the other side of the building and opened a window there.

I found myself looking at a long workman's bench, of the kind that window cleaners use. It was hanging against the wall suspended by ropes let down from the roof. It would be an easy climb up one of the ropes to the roof parapet. I decided to go after Osmens. I crawled cautiously out of the window and, holding onto the rope, began to walk up the face of the silo. I registered some shouts from below. The alarm had been given, and a scattering of people had gathered around the building. The cries were my undoing, because they alerted Osmens. I was still out of reach of the parapet when Osmens's head and shoulders suddenly loomed out above me and then disappeared again. To proceed up the rope now that a man with homicidal tendencies knew I was there would be too risky. I was preparing to abseil back again when a large metal

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paint can came hurtling down and struck me a blow on the elbow, numbing my forearm. I lost my grip and swung from one hand, feet scrabbling at the wall. Someone shouted below. Then a beating drone filled the air as a police chopper swung into the air space over the roof. A rifle cracked. Osmens slid out of view. In the minute that had passed, some feeling had returned to my hand. I judged Osmens to be out of action now and I resumed my climb. I got both palms over the parapet, levered myself up, and swung a leg over in time to see the chopper touch down on the roof. Inspector Cupido, rifle in hand, emerged cautiously.

"This guy got a gun?" he demanded.

I said I didn't think so and could I talk to him first?

"You've earned it," he conceded.

Osmens was sitting on the roof, leaning against the parapet and clutching his upper arm. I was feeling a little vindictive and easily suppressed any Florence Nightingale impulses. I sat down on the parapet, close, but not too close.

"Let's pretend I'm putting together a crime feature on you," I said pleasantly. "You are Vossler Osmens, but you have been going under the identity of your twin brother Wim, who is married to a woman called Marie. You, with your accomplices, have ripped off a couple of businesses in the past, and nothing in your present behaviour suggests that you have any desire to join the ranks of honest citizens. You were planning to enter these premises over the back fence, put the TV surveillance out of action, bag the baksheesh, and decamp. Wim has been hiding out in the house in Maitland, ready to provide you with an alibi for the time of the crime. I'm sure he and his wife will be able to confirm this general outline when the police pick them up."

He shot me a glance that carbonised my eyelashes.

"They won't find Wim in my house. I haven't a clue where my brother is. We haven't sunk a cold Castle together since way back when."

Then he must be food for fishes in the Flying Dutchman's larder, I thought.

"I shook hands with him Wednesday last," I said. I saw his confident incredulity with satisfaction and prepared to shatter it. "I don't think you would've recognised him. He'd caught a chill and shed a lot of flesh. Been ripped off something fierce by some sharks and scaly gents. If you wanted to be poetic, you could say he'd suffered a sea change. In fact, the only way the cops could put a moniker on him was through the flour under his nails and the prints on his fingers," I bluffed. I'd kicked his feet out from underneath him and had him flat on his back on the mat. I prepared to drop down on his stomach with my knees.

"When I give evidence about the way you tried to dispose of me

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in the silo, the police will easily conclude you used the same method on your brother. They'll examine the boat in the boathouse and find more evidence, traces of flour, who knows what else."

"I only meant to knock you level with the gravel so I could make tracks fast," he muttered, avoiding my eyes. He was revolving something in his mind, perhaps judging the strength of the case against him. He came to a decision.

"All right. Wim's dead. But it was an accident! The whole thing was just a dog's breakfast. Sunday before last, see, we're sloping in with the explosives. I've got the way to open the safe sussed out, but there's a security gate to blast through first. We scale over the back fence when we scheme the security will be watching the soccer international on his portable. We're going to sink the stuff in one of the bins. The security cameras can't cover the whole scene. There are some blind spots, and this bin is one. The explosives are wrapped in polythene, and I use a penknife to cut bits of string to tie it in a parcel. We also tie on a long piece. This we are going to wedge under the bin cover so I can haul up the goods when it's time for the strike. The parcel's too big to go down the outlet, and if anyone opens the bin cover, the white string falls down into the flour and no one smells a rat."

"One of the bits of string you cut off fell into the bin and went with the flour down the chute to the packaging department. A packer fished it out there," I said, remembering that Samuels's coworker had complained of finding a piece of string in the flour.

"I heard about that today by chance. I was, you know, worried in case something else had fallen in and was still there, so I gave orders for the bin to be cleaned a second time."

"Your fetters have been fashioned from that little bit of string. It caused Phil Samuels to throw up his job and disappear, and brought me on the track."

This little excursion into causality brought that "if only" expression to his eyes, the one when we look back at some small step we took which led to comprehensive ruin.

"I schemed we should take the big explosives down into the bin and plant them under the flour," he continued. "So I pitch it to Wim that he must get in the bosun's chair with the parcel and I will lower him down. But not Mr. I-don't-want-to-dirty-*my*-hands. I get the moer in. It's always me that has to do the dirty work and take the risks because he's a swakpens. I tell him this. Suddenly he's going babbelas and landing body punches. I lose my cool and connect with his ear. He staggers back like he doesn't know whether he's in now or next week. His foot misses the floor and he crashes through the manhole of the flour bin. I crouch down at the edge, but he's too far down for me to see him. There's a racket going on from some of the machinery that's never switched off. I

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yell down to Wim, but he doesn't answer. Either he can't hear me or he's lights-out. Now we are both in a hole, because I can't get down to him on my own. I leave the cover slightly open for air, struggle to get back over the fence with the parcel, and gun the wheels for Maitland.

"I bring Marie up to date and she starts wailing and carrying on. I say, 'Let's go,' but she schemes it will be safer to wait until dark. So we wait, but all the time I'm getting this bad feeling like I'm stifling. When it's dark we take a rope and torch and drive back to the mill. I open the bin and shine the torch down. Wim's lying on his kisser in the flour. Marie is nipping straws, she thinks he's a goner. I lower her down on the chair and she turns him over and ties the rope around him. I winch, and she brings up the end of the rope with her. Together we haul him up. We see he's been breathing flour instead of air, which is a mistake you don't make twice. He's already cold.

"We manage to carry him out of the mill, load him in the boot of the car, and drive back to the house. Monday night we weigh the body with stones, pack it under a tarpaulin in the boat, and take the freeway down to Strandfontein. We start the outboard and launch out over the surf. A bit later, when we're out of sight in a trough between two big rollers, we heave him over the side."

Osmens closed his eyes as if in anguish.

"Since then, I've felt a—whatd'youcallit when a part of you is amputated?"

"A phantom pain."

"Yes. And Marie bawls if you just check her out a bit skeef. And she has nightmares every night."

He should have walked the boards. You would have thought he was Hamlet's Horatio and had muttered, "Good night, sweet Prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest," over the stiff he was dumping, and was now busy absenting himself from felicity awhile. Lucky old Felicity, was my feeling.

"This bashfulness becomes you, Osmens," I smiled, "but I'm afraid I must bushel your hide under a light and give you and Marie the credit you deserve for an ingenious murder. Marie is infatuated with you. You can't deny it. The pupils of her eyes dilate when she looks at her wedding photo, and after eighteen years of marriage it's not her husband she's seeing. It's you. You two must've wanted to get together, but I'll bet old Wim wasn't having any. Maybe he would even have been spiteful enough to spill the beans about the heists. So in deliberate, hardhearted callousness both of you planned to kill him. You lured your brother to the mill, using the pretext of taking in the explosives for the safe-breaking. You made a pretence of preparing the stuff for lowering

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into the bin. Then, when he was unsuspecting, you struck him unconscious, threw him into the bin, and replaced the cover.

"Off you trotted, like a clever little microchip murderer, to the control room. You seated yourself at the computer console and typed in the instructions that opened the chute leading into the bin and sent a snowdrift of floury death cascading down upon your brother. You left him there to smother. That night you returned with your lover and retrieved the body for a sea burial.

"You chose this method of killing him," I concluded, "because if, by any ill luck, someone got wind of the circumstances surrounding his death, you would be able to alibi yourself with this fictional history of accidental death. You may get away with it, too; your story's sufficiently close to the truth to be believed."

At this, the inspector stepped forward and jerked Osmens to his feet with an unfriendly emphasis that spoke his determination not to let him get away with anything. I remained where I was, watching as the guilty man was bundled into the chopper. It lifted and swung away into the heavens on a flight course to justice.

It felt good that the murdered man's remains could now rest in peace and be covered by the tide-blown shrouding sands to the muffled sound of the drumming surf. He had been no Agamemnon, but a cruel death, even that of a petty villain, should find some redress. From the roof I had a grandstand view of Devil's Peak. Today the mountain was wreathed in cloud: The Dutchman Van Hunks and the Devil were having their pipe-smoking duel again. I thought Van Hunks was winning this round.●

Solution to the Mystery Crossword

O	T	T	S	■	R	A	V	E	D	■	K	I	S	S
S	O	H	O	■	E	L	E	V	E	■	I	L	I	E
A	N	E	W	■	M	A	R	I	A	■	L	E	N	E
K	I	T	■	D	O	N	A	L	D	O	L	S	O	N
A	C	H	I	E	V	E	■	■	B	L	E	■	■	■
■	■	E	L	L	E	■	B	R	E	A	D	T	H	S
R	I	F	L	E	■	M	I	L	A	N	■	H	I	E
A	N	T	S	■	J	A	N	E	T	■	M	E	D	E
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D	E	F	I	A	N	C	E	■	B	A	L	I	■	■
■	■	■	N	I	E	■	■	L	U	C	A	N	I	A
R	U	T	H	R	E	N	D	E	L	L	■	G	R	R
I	L	I	A	■	Y	O	U	N	G	■	A	D	A	M
T	A	L	L	■	R	O	N	D	E	■	M	O	T	O
A	N	T	E	■	E	N	E	A	S	■	A	M	E	R

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Lightning and Fireflies

by L.D. Kaye

As it stormed and raged that dark wretched night,
Sparky hummed with enthusiasm as they brought him to life;
Lightning and thunder exploding with zeal,
While down the hall she sat innocent, having her last meal.

In the governor's mansion His Honor reviewed,
Then telephoned the warden with his not-so-good news.

In the parking lot umbrellas assembled together,
Shielding their candles from the ungodly weather;
From a distance this assemblage appeared quite a sight,
As if hundreds of fireflies had joined in her plight.

As Nel looked out from her third-story cell,
The dance of the fireflies whispered all would be well.

The thunder and lightning continued to roar,
But now a new sound . . . footsteps at the door;
As she walked to her fate, she remembered the sight
Of the fireflies dancing free in the night.

Old Sparky seemed anxious as they strapped her in tight,
The priest's voice an echo as he gave her last rites.

As the switch was thrown on, a lightning bolt hit,
Causing Sparky to spark and light bulbs to dim.
Bright flames soon erupted and smoke filled the space,
And by the time things had cleared, Nel had vanished without trace.

And as the guards searched the chamber from ceiling to floor,
A lightning bug silently zipped out the door.

Outside the prison the weather was clearing—
The crowd was dispersing—the moon reappearing.
And as the warden looked out at that silent clear night,
A point of light winked and then blinked out of sight.

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BY JEFFERY DEAVER

The Wagon Mound
BY VAL MCDERMID

The Vampire Theme
BY EDWARD D. HOCH

The Blind Woman
BY JANICE LAW

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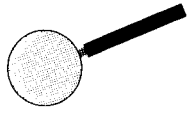

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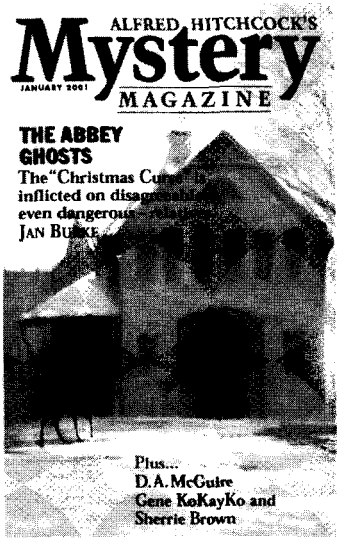

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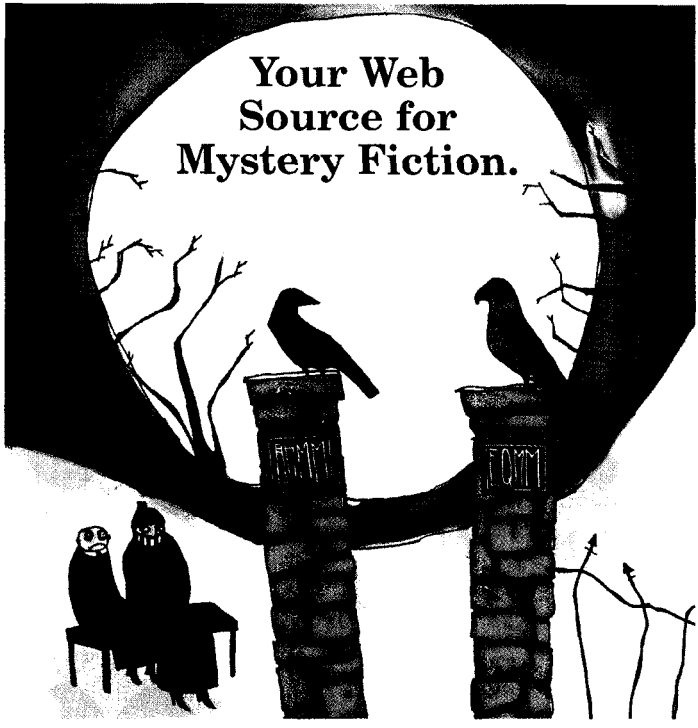

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